



THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER

NOVEL

1

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**“Here
I go.”**

I gently wrapped my
lips around her ear
without letting my
teeth touch her.





LOLA

OLIVIA SERVANT

EMMA BRIGHTNESS

LUNA

ALICE STARDIA

NOIR STARDIA



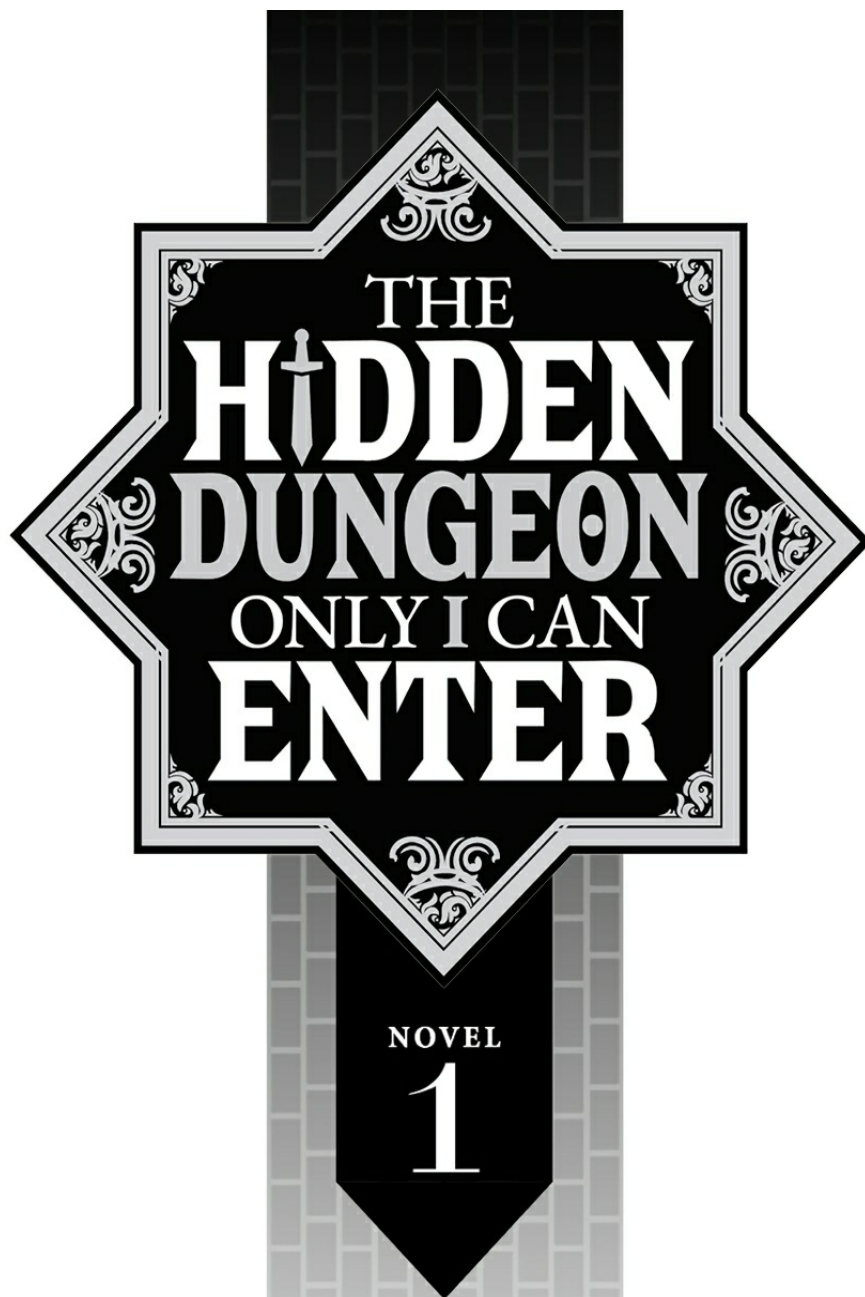
“One, two, three!”

KISS

KISS

KISS

The three of them
all gave me a kiss
at the same time,
and I froze.
The audience
reacted before I
managed to.



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1:

The Great Sage Skill

I STOOD INSIDE a hidden dungeon—that’s what everyone called these places. It was undiscovered and unexplored. Even if anyone *did* know about it, they certainly didn’t know how to get in. The doors wouldn’t open, there were no stairs, it was guarded by ridiculously powerful monsters...you get the idea.

So, naturally, whoever discovered how to get inside would be hailed as a hero—but let’s not get ahead of ourselves! Not to put too fine a point on it, these hidden dungeons are so important that even the great Janton Jastal could live a life of leisure ten times over just by stumbling into one.

Now back to my possibly ill-advised and life-changing adventure into unknown territory.

“Where did that thing come from?! This is only the third floor!”

A skeleton monster, grim as death itself, stood in front of me. I couldn’t stifle my scream. Even from here, I could tell it was a dangerous enemy.

The tattered remnants of its garment drifted through the air as it raised its scythe. Fighting was my only option. I swiftly deployed a skill I had acquired on the previous level, Discerning Eye, to scan its abilities. It was even worse than I feared.

Name: Dead Reaper

Level: 99

Skills: Execution Slash

At Level 23, I was already comically outclassed by the creature, but that skill was beyond unfair.

Execution Slash: Damage dealt with Scythe inflicts Instant Death on target. Effect cannot be avoided unless target has specific protection against Instant Death.

In other words, one hit and I'd earn myself a one-way ticket to the pearly gates. I didn't stand a chance, so I used another skill I'd learned, Editor, to modify the skill description and remove the words "Instant Death".

Delete: "Instant Death" — 1,000 LP

"You've gotta be kidding me! How am I supposed to manage that?"

I just needed to delete those two little words to essentially neuter the entire skill, but it required a ton of LP and, funny story, I only had 500. I was dead meat.

"I guess I'll just have to Get Creative!"

I used 100 LP to create a skill I dubbed Heavy and then used Bestow to attach the status to the enemy. Bestow cost me another 100 LP, dropping me to 300. I could feel my strength draining, but I braced myself and pushed through. I really didn't want to die here.

"Ugh, I just have to try."

It was supposed to be impossible to enter this dungeon. Why didn't I leave it alone? Why did I, the third son of an insignificant family, try to make a name for myself? For that answer, you'll have to join me on a little trip down memory lane.

A few days before, I rose from my drab bed and went into the living room. I was greeted by an unusual sight: my father, prostrating himself. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him in such a pathetic position.

"I'm sorry Noir! I'm so sorry!" he exclaimed, forehead pressed firmly into the

floor.

“Father, raise your head. What on earth is the matter?”

“Noir, there is something I must tell you about the library...”

Perhaps I should take a moment to introduce myself: I’m Noir, the third son of the noble Stardia family. I had just graduated from Jastal Preparatory School, where commoners and the nobility mingled freely. Due to family circumstances, I’d decided to enter the workforce rather than pursue higher education. My soon-to-be workplace was a library, which I guess is just a roundabout way of saying I was about to become a librarian. I’d been a bookworm ever since I was little, so I was excited.

“Yes, I know, father. I start today. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Oh, um, so about that librarian position...those strings I pulled didn’t exactly work.”

“What? I thought you set it up with your friend?”

“Well, apparently a viscount suddenly called in a favor for his son and now there are no openings.”

I’d lost my job before I even started. I could feel a headache coming on. The aristocracy had a certain hierarchy—duke, marquess, earl, viscount, baron and baronet—and generally you can’t oppose someone with a higher title. This would probably be a good opportunity to mention that our family, the Stardias, hold a baronetcy. Even in the kindest light, we barely qualify as nobility. We certainly couldn’t stand up to a count.

“Please stand up, father. Yes, becoming a librarian has been my dream since I was a small child, and I was desperately looking forward to it, but I simply... cannot resent you for it, father.”

“Really? Not even a little?!”

“But what am I going to do now, you old far...father?”

“You were about to call me ‘old fart’ weren’t you?! You were! I knew you were angry, my dear boy...”

“All right, jokes aside. What am I going to do? I know we hardly count as

nobles, but it's pretty unseemly for a baronet's son to be unemployed."

Wounded by my jab about our status, my father turned the conversation over to my mother and sister.

"Noir, I know it's not your first choice, but why don't you try taking the exam for the Hero Academy?" my mother asked.

"I would never pass."

"Well, if that happens, I'll support you, brother dearest."

"I appreciate it, Alice, but I don't really like the idea of leeching off you. I think I'll take a walk to gather my thoughts."

As I roamed the neighborhood, trying to process the shock, a beautiful girl ran toward me, her ample bosom bouncing with each step.

"Good morning, Noir! Are you ready?"

"Oh, morning, Emma."

Her name was Emma Brightness, and she was sixteen years old with a girlish charm. Her face promised that she'd mature into a legendary beauty, and her bust made her the idol of our prep school—and not just with the boys, if you know what I mean. She wore a cheap barrette in her glossy blonde hair; I'd given it to her. The two of us had grown up together.



“Ehe he he he! We’re going to be librarians together now, Noir! It’ll be hard work, but we’ll do it!”

She was so excited about the prospect of us working together that it pained me to break the news, but I told her what had happened.

“What? So, w-w-wait, this means you aren’t going to be a librarian?”

“Apparently not. I’ll just have to support you from the shadows, Emma.”

Emma’s father was a baron and, unlike the Stardias, her family had both financial and social capital in abundance. Our parents were friends, and we’d spent a lot of time together ever since we were kids. Despite the difference in our class, she never looked down on me. We were even going to work together—or at least, we were supposed to.

“Hey, why do you seem more bummed out about this than I am?” I asked.

“I mean, like...look, I was really looking forward to sharing some good news, but how am I supposed to do that now?”

“Good news?”

“Yeah, it’s about your skill. See, I was reading some ancient texts yesterday and it got me thinking.”

“You mean my Great Sage skill? Do tell.”

Great Sage was my one and only skill, and it was a pretty rare one. My parents jumped for joy at the church’s skill appraisal when I was seven. Great Sage is a skill possessed by celebrated sages, and many fundamental truths about the world have been learned through its use. It’s even answered things that scholars couldn’t previously understand. But as great a gift as it was, it was wasted on me. I couldn’t use it.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. Technically I could use it, but every time it gave me a headache so bad I’d wish I was dead. It was called a cluster headache. At any rate, the excruciating pain prevented me from ever making use of my skill’s true potential.

“I found a note about the sage, Marlin. Apparently, whenever he had a bad headache, he would call upon his wives and demand kisses.”

“A perv with a kiss fetish? Impressive combo.”

“Listen! Marlin would get headaches when he used his skill too, so maybe those kisses alleviated them.”

“Well, I guess that’s possible.”

“Right? S-so, wh-what if we try it?”

“What? You and me?”

“Wh-who else would I be talking about? We’ve known each other since we were little, a kiss is basically nothing. People greet each other with kisses in other countries anyway, and I *am* an adult, you know...”

I let out a chuckle as I watched her squirm. She was probably just trying to be nice.

“All right,” I said. “Make it quick then.”

“Q-quick?! Wh-where’s the romance in that?!”

“Romance?”

“Let’s go to the clocktower,” she declared.

I wasn’t sure what she was getting at, but I followed her to the top of the clocktower anyway.

Once we were there, she said, “G-go ahead.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Her lips were soft and warm, but I found myself distracted. I couldn’t help wondering whether this would actually work.

“You can do it!” Emma gave me a boost of encouragement.

At that, I felt power surge through my body, and I called upon my skill.

Great Sage, please answer my call.

<As you wish.>

I want to get stronger so I can pass the entrance exam for the Hero Academy. Tell me, what’s the fastest way to become stronger?

<Exploring a hidden dungeon is the most effective method.> My...my head...?

Normally, the pain would have started at this point, but I was totally fine! I was so excited that my next thought just slipped out of my mouth. “Where is the closest dungeon?”

<Walk 48,048 meters southwest and enter the cave you find there. Follow the cave for 100 yards and press the button on the right wall. A staircase leading to the Infinite Labyrinth will appear. There you shall recite the following spell—> Though I heard the incantation, I was fairly distracted by incandescent agony.

“Agh! My brain feels like it’s going to explode through my eye sockets!”

“Noir?! Should I give you another kiss?!”

“Please!”

We kissed, several times in fact, and the splitting pain vanished like it had never been. I couldn’t believe that kissing actually worked, but I was getting a little unsettled, so I stopped using the skill.

“We...we kissed seven times...” Emma said. Her face was red as an apple as we walked home.

“Thanks for what you did for me today,” I said. “I hope I can call on you again in my time of need.”

“Uh...f-fine, I can’t abandon someone in *need*.”

I said my goodbyes and ran home as fast as I could. When I walked in, my father was still prostrating himself on the floor.

“Noir! With utmost sincerity, I beg—”

“Enough, father! Bring me the sharpest blade in the house!”

“Spare me! You can even call me ‘old fart’ if you want, I won’t mind! Anything! Just don’t kill me!”

“What are you, stupid?! I’m not going to kill you! I need a sword to train for the Hero Academy!”

“Oh, now I get it.”

And with that, he lent me his finest, sharpest sword. Despite what you might

think, my father used to be an adventurer too. Granted, it had been as a part-time job when he was short on cash, but he was an adventurer nonetheless. At any rate, I strapped the sword to my hip and dashed out of town.

The sun was directly overhead by the time I arrived at my destination. The cave in question didn't draw much attention to itself. I slipped past the entrance and pressed on the wall a little way inside, just as my skill had directed. It really moved! The space closed off, turning it into a small room, and a staircase appeared, leading down.

Thank the Great Sage!

I nervously descended into the unknown.

"Whoa, it's true."

The stairs led down into an open space with massive metal gates that even powerful magic likely wouldn't move. I stood before them and recited the spell.

"Hidden dungeon only I can enter—let me train in secret to become the strongest in the world!"

The room rumbled and, to my surprise, that profoundly stupid password opened the gates. I never would have figured it out on my own.

This hidden dungeon is mine and mine alone, I thought as I triumphantly walked through.

Chapter 2:

Powerful Skill Set

THE DUNGEON was surprisingly unremarkable inside. It even had torches placed at regular intervals on the brick walls, although it seemed like it would be easy to get lost in the labyrinthine corridors.

“I guess there’s no use being scared. I just have to get going.”

I took one step inside and the door shut behind me—*holy crap!* Before I could get my wits about me, a woman’s voice suddenly echoed from inside.

“Welcome, brave hero... I await you on the second level. Be sure y...and...you will...”

The voice grew hoarse and trailed off at the end, so I couldn’t quite make it out. It was possible I was walking into a trap. I gripped my sword and proceeded straight down the passage. I turned right at the end, and promptly froze in my tracks.

“No... No way...”

I was face-to-face with shining, golden slimes. They were your typical round jelly monsters in every respect but color. Normally, slimes were a nice blue or green. Red existed too, but they were rare in this region. But gold? Those were practically unheard of. So what were *three* of them doing here?

They looked pretty belligerent too—spitting out noxious gold liquid. I dodged and brought down my sword. I may not have cut a particularly gallant image, but I did cut one of them in half. I used the same strategy on the other two. Slimes were weak monsters, so even I managed somehow.

Warmth enveloped me and I felt power course through my body. I must’ve leveled up quite a bit. I was just a measly Level 5 after all—I’d need to get evaluated later.

“I guess they’re probably edible?”

Slimes were also used for culinary purposes. Their flavor varied depending on

their diet, and some people even farmed them. I scooped up one of the halved jellies and took a bite.

“It’s so sweet!” It tasted almost like honey, but somehow more refined. I took another bite, and then another, and before I knew it, I’d eaten the whole thing. “Oh no, I have to save some to bring back to mother and Alice.”

As for father...I’m not sure he deserves any, I thought as I stuffed the remaining slimes into my bag. The gold ones weren’t very strong breeders, so they were quite valuable. They’d probably fetch a pretty penny at the market, and there were even more where these came from. I felled a few more of the creatures, quickly filling my bag.

Once I found the stairs, I made my way down to the next level.

“...ere...thi...s...way...”

It was that voice again. Maybe it was a trap, but I couldn’t put it out of my mind. There were several doors leading to small rooms on the second level and I followed the voice into one of them.

An emaciated blue-haired woman was chained in the middle of the room. The chains ran out of round holes in the walls, and the woman was limp and frail.

“You’re not dead, are you?” I said, stopping a few feet away.

I could see her pale face, but I couldn’t tell how old she was. The only thing I could be sure of was that she’d be a total knockout if she were in better health.

“Come closer and...touch my...head...”

She sounded like she was about to drop dead, so I steeled myself and did as she requested.

“Whoa!”

All of a sudden, everything she wanted to tell me came crashing into my head like an avalanche. Was that what people called telepathy?

She was Olivia Servant, a super-duper extremely top-class adventurer (*Seriously?*). Apparently, she was last active in the kingdom over two hundred years ago. She stumbled on the hidden dungeon and got inside after she found an ancient stone tablet in a cave and deciphered its text. So, it turned out I

wasn't the first person in here after all.

Olivia ended up in her present predicament after defeating a demon in this very room and subsequently triggering a trap. The really shocking thing was that she'd been stuck here for all two hundred years she'd been missing. That made my skin crawl just thinking about it.

"I think I got the gist of it," I said. "I'll cut you down now."

<No, don't! It's a curse. Don't touch anything!>

Her voice echoed through my skull. It was velvety and full of energy, unlike her body, which was still as inert and vacant as ever. Her mind seemed to be completely detached from her physical form.

<They're Death Chains—cut them and it's curtains for Olivia.>

"Why'd you call me here then?"

<I was desperate for someone to talk to. I knew it was hopeless, but I just kept sending my message anyway, just in case—and hey! It worked eventually, didn't it?! Just brings a tear to your eye, huh?>

It didn't seem like she knew I'd responded. She must've been at it for two hundred years.

<By the way, you've got some real potential, kid.>

"Thanks. The name's Noir. I came here to get stronger, and—"

I casually introduced myself, but while she still didn't even bat an eyelash, her telepathic voice was lively as ever.

<Really?! Well that's just perfect! I was just thinking about finding someone to hand my skills to. Not like they're any use to me anymore! You can have 'em. Now, sorry to be a bother, but could you press your forehead against mine?>

"Like this?"

Nervous as I was, I brought my forehead up to hers. As soon as I did, I felt a wave of heat flood my body, almost like my blood was boiling.

<Dun dun da-dun! Congratulations! You're now the proud owner of my skills, Noir! They've got some issues, sure, but they're all super powerful! Now I can

pass on with no regrets. Farewell!>

“No, wait! Don’t die yet!”

<I’m not dead, stupid. It’s called a joke, ever heard of one? Now lemme explain my skills.>



Each of the skills she described—entirely matter-of-factly—were completely and utterly broken in every respect.

Get Creative: Freely create new skills. Getting Creative consumes LP. The amount of LP consumed varies depending on the skill created, but original skills are typically more costly.

Bestow: Grant skills generated with Get Creative to other creatures or objects. The LP cost varies depending on the nature of the skill being Bestowed and the nature of the recipient.

Editor: Edit skills belonging to you, others, or things. Editing consumes LP. The amount of LP consumed varies depending on the edit being made.

LP Conversion: The following circumstances cause LP to increase—consuming particularly delectable food, engaging in sexual activity with attractive members of the opposite sex, fulfilling a desire for financial or material gain, satisfying any other basic desires (including the production of offspring).

I did some pretty frantic math out of concern for the state of my LP. Get Creative, Bestow, Editor—I'd never heard of any of them before. They had to be unique skills.

<Like I said, they're all really strong, aren't they?! I mean, sure, you gotta save up LP to use 'em, but still.>

"Sounds like you've gotta be a real hedonist to save LP that way, though."

<I did live a life of luxury! I had a nice house, paid for with my plentiful income, ate delicious food, and enjoyed plenty of good men.>

"You really got around, huh."

<Can't deny it! But now you get to indulge too, Noir! You gotta indulge to save. Funny, huh?>

"Oh, no, I, uh..."

<Ugh... All right, how much LP do you have right now, exactly?>

When I thought about it, the number 550 crossed my mind.

<Wow, that's really not a lot. You probably won't be able to make powerful skills with that, but why don't you try making something just to see how it works?>

"What happens if I run out of LP?"

<You die, duh.>

She probably should have started with that.

"If I use up all my LP and die, that'll make you a murderer."

<Oh, I didn't take you for that kind of a man, Noir. You're the type of guy who doesn't just look before you leap, you look twice and never make the jump.>

"Hmph."

<Ooh, did I hit a sore spot? Ha ha, sorry. Anyway, give it a shot and make something. Start out with something easy like Stone Bullet maybe?>

"Okay, fine."

I used Get Creative to generate Stone Bullet. It would only cost me 50 LP, so I went ahead. The spell should've been usable after that, so I tried it out to make sure.

Pew! Ka-thunk!

A stone, about eight inches in diameter, shot through the air and smashed into the wall.

I gaped. "I can't believe it's this easy to get new skills."

<I know, right? It's super handy. So, how are you feeling?>

"Um, a little tired, I guess."

<Sounds like you should call it quits for the day and get some rest. But you'd better come back! I'll coach you—all you have to do is call me 'Master.'>

"Very well, Master. I humbly request that you continue to keep me in your good graces."

<Ew, so stiff!>

“Well, considering your preferences, Master, I’m sure you’d prefer to keep things *casual*.”

<You have a nasty tongue on you, Noir.>

“I’ll be back.”

I had been here a while, so I followed her suggestion and left the dungeon. I stopped by the church on my way home and asked my friend, Father Dahl, to give me a skill appraisal.

“What on earth has happened to you, Noir?! You have skills I’ve never even heard of, and weren’t you Level 5 the last time I saw you?”

So, apparently, I’d shot up to Level 20. Those golden slimes were even more valuable than I thought.

Chapter 3:

Bestowing Strange Skills on Things!

I KEPT MY MOUTH shut about the hidden dungeon. I knew my mother and Alice would say it was too dangerous and do everything in their power to keep me from going back. I did share the golden slimes with them, though.

“Would you like some of these? I can’t tell you where I got them, but I promise they’re delicious.”

“Noir, I know you can see me. Why are you ignoring your poor father?”

Father looked so distraught, I broke down and increased my invitation from two to three. Each of them took a bite of slime and stood up to shout, “Delicious!” Not that I was surprised; that was the same reaction I’d had. There was still some left too...or would have been, if my father hadn’t been an incorrigible glutton and annihilated the rest. See, that was why I ignored him in the first place. But ultimately it didn’t matter much. I could easily get more.

“Brother dearest, I have never tasted something so sweet in my life!” Alice exclaimed.

“Glad you liked it,” I said. “I can bring more soon. By the way, when was the exam for the Hero Academy again?”

“The day after tomorrow, my dear boy,” my father answered.

“And if I were to somehow pass, you wouldn’t be able to pay for my tuition, would you?”

“Urgh... Look, your father does have *some* pride left, but that’s going to be a little...”

It was plain as day that the purse strings were tight. Sure, I had two older brothers, but they had both left the capital and were living in other towns. My oldest brother was a knight stationed in the countryside, and my middle brother was in trade school. And trade school wasn’t cheap. Our family had to really scrimp and save to make the tuition. That was why I wasn’t in school

myself.

“I could always go to the academy part-time. Maybe I’ll do some exploring or dungeon seeking on the side.”

“Oh, but Noir,” said my father. “You’re just so—”

“Father, I’m growing up. I’d hope you’d have more faith in me.”

“But you mustn’t, brother dearest. Please, do not do anything dangerous.”

“Appearances notwithstanding, I am a man, Alice.”

I swung my sword to illustrate. I think I cut a pretty good form, thanks to my level increase. If nothing else, it was enough to temporarily silence my father.

I’m gonna get stronger. I’ll show you.

The following day, I put my new skills to practical use. I started by making skills I thought would be useful. I figured that my level would probably keep rising as I explored the dungeon, and going to the church to check it each time would be a pain in the ass, so I wanted to give myself the ability to appraise levels and skills. How else could I be sure that Bestowing a skill actually worked?

Discerning Eye — 300 LP

It definitely wasn’t cheap. That would leave me with only 200 LP, and probably put me in bed for a week. As I’d learned from my master, the lower your LP, the more prone you are to getting sick. I needed to replenish my stores.

“Thanks for waiting for me, Noir!”

Emma arrived at the park where I’d asked to meet. I wanted to thank her for what she’d done yesterday.

“Morning, Emma. You seem a little different today.”

“Oh, do I? I don’t think so,” she said with a smile.

Normally she hated wearing clothes that exposed a lot of skin—well, more specifically, her chest—but today she was wearing a dress that fully bared her shoulders and even showed a bit of cleavage.

“You don’t usually wear such revealing clothes.”

“Well, like, look! Today’s special! You’re such a dummy, Noir!”

I wasn’t sure what I’d done to deserve that, but apparently I’d put my foot in my mouth.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” I apologized. “I just wanted to treat you to a delicious slime today.”

“Now that might put me in a better mood.”

“Here.” Thanks to my idiot father’s gluttony, I had only one slime left, but I offered it freely.

“Wooooow, that’s so sweet!” Emma said.

I think she liked it.

“Where did you buy this?”

“That’s a secret. Let’s just say it didn’t come from any store you know.”

“Lame. You’re not supposed to keep secrets from your best friend.”

“I’m pretty sure someone once said that men are more appealing when they have an aura of mystery.”

Emma stopped just as she was about to say something like I was plenty appealing just as I was. Instead, I asked her for what I really wanted.

“I know this might sound kinda weird, but I wanna give you a hug.”

“Wh-where’s this coming from?!”

“You’re just looking really attractive today, Emma. Is that a no?”

“N-no, it’s not.”

“Well, don’t mind if I do, then.”

I hugged her. I figured this counted as sexual contact of some sort. Her body was soft and felt so nice in my arms, I couldn’t resist squeezing her a little. She

hugged me back and we just stood like that for a moment. I could even smell the gentle fragrance of the soap she'd used on her hair. She was from a much wealthier family, so she used the good stuff.

"Thanks," I said.

"Oh, it's no big deal. It's basically like saying hello. You can hug me any time."

My scheme worked:

500 LP → 850 LP

It was a personal first, which must have been why it was worth so much. I used Discerning Eye to appraise Emma.

Name: Emma Brightness Age: 16

Species: Human

Level: 18

Occupation: Unemployed Skills: Dual Wielded Daggers (Grade C); Wind Strike

Some skills, like Emma's Dual Wielded Daggers, had grades. There were typically four: C, B, A, and S, with S being the highest. C-Grade was honestly plenty impressive. Compared to someone with no skill, she was exceptionally deft with a dagger.

The one thing that surprised me was the part about her being "unemployed."

"What happened to your librarian job?" I asked.

"I quit yesterday. I didn't really like it."

"That seems a little fast."

"Not if you ask me!" she said with a loud, nervous laugh.

If she'd quit, did that mean there was space for me now...? But I quickly gave up on the idea, I'd already decided to walk a different path.

Having safely acquired the skill I was after, I decided to take a walk with Emma. I noticed she kept rolling her shoulders and stretching. When I asked if her shoulders were bothering her, she responded with a deep nod.

“Because your boobs are so big?” I asked.

“Y-yes, but is that really something you should say to a lady?!”

“I mean, we’re best friends, aren’t we? I’d never say that to any girl but you, Emma.”

“Oh, well, uh, in that case... Heh, I guess we *are* pretty close after all.”

I wished there was something I could do for her, and then I had a brilliant idea.

Small Boobs — 30 LP

I was honestly kind of shocked at how cheap that was. Maybe it was already a thing? Were small boobs even a skill?

“If you could make your boobs smaller, would you want to?”

“Yeah, I guess? I do remember things being a lot easier when I was younger.”

“What if I could make your wish come true?”

“Oh ho ho ho, go right ahead.”

I tried using Bestow, which would cost a total of 80 LP, including the creation of the skill. I still had 550 LP, so it wouldn’t be an issue. I Got Creative and produced the skill, then Bestowed it upon her. In an instant, Emma’s massive boobs shrank, leaving her flat-chested and cleavage-free.

“Huh?! What the—?!”

“I gave you small boobs like you wanted.”

“But how?! Wh-what just happened?!”

“I gave you a skill called Small Boobs.”

Emma’s mouth flapped impotently. I couldn’t blame her, none of this made

much sense. I assured her that it wouldn't have any ill effects on her body.

"Okay, but, wow, I really am flat... I hardly feel like myself."

"It probably lowered your body weight a bit too. Plus, you should be happy, there are plenty of people who are into small boobs."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. I'm firmly a big boobs man myself, though."

"Give them back right noooow!"

"Uh..."

I thought she'd be happy with that weight off her shoulders. What a waste of LP.

Since she was so insistent, I set about returning her to normal. Of course, I had to figure out how, exactly. Could I just give her a Big Boobs skill? But surely that'd just be canceled out by Small Boobs and she'd end up with an average chest. Maybe massive? Gargantuan? Giga boobs? It all sounded terrifying. But I figured my Editor skill might be the right choice.

Small Boobs: Makes one's breasts small.

The Editor skill seemed to allow me to edit anything in the description. I could add, change, or delete any part of it, so I settled on removing the two words "boobs" and "small."

Delete: "Small Boobs" — 90 LP

It felt like such a waste, but I had to do it. I felt a little dizzy, probably because I'd been knocked down to 380 LP. Regardless, it looked like it worked. The Small Boobs skill was gone. Getting rid of the elements that fundamentally defined the skill made it disappear completely.

“Hooray! They’re back! I missed you two so much!”

“Good. But I’m feeling a little sick, so would you let me rest my head in your lap maybe?”

“Oh, you look so pale! Come here.”

I was forced to take a break on a nearby bench, but I rested my head on Emma’s tender thighs, and my LP recovered to 450. I had one more thing I wanted to edit, so I needed the points replenished.

“You know, Emma, I just realized we never did that exotic greeting today.”

“Huh? Are you feeling okay?”

“I think it’ll make me recover faster.”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

She leaned over me and gently placed her lips on mine. Perfect. My LP went up to 500.

“Could I get just one more?”

“Okay.”

Unfortunately, the second one didn’t do anything. Maybe repeated actions didn’t count. Or maybe there was some kind of cooldown period before you could get more LP? That made sense. It wouldn’t really be fair if you could get infinite LP just from hugs. Then again, maybe first experiences or more novel ones were just worth more. I had a lot of research to do.

Chapter 4:

Hero Academy

I WAS FEELING A LOT BETTER, so I continued my stroll with Emma. And, since my LP was back up to 500, I decided to test out my Editor skill again.

Stone Bullet: Consumes magic to generate and fire a stone roughly eight inches in diameter.

Every human had magic, although the precise amount varied. When you drained your reserves, you couldn't use spells, and it could have an adverse effect on your mental and physical strength. Some people were wiped out after using just one spell, others could do well over a hundred without breaking a sweat—talk about a disparity! But enough of that, I had some editing to do.

I wanted to change the “roughly eight inches” part of the description to “between five inches and three feet.” It was going to cost me 100 LP, but I felt like I could handle it.

To be honest, Stone Bullet wasn't a particularly destructive spell, so I was glad to be able to produce larger projectiles, even if it did mean expending more magic. On the other hand, I could also produce smaller projectiles when I needed to conserve magic.

“Please, good sir, fine lady, take pity,” an old man called out from the side of the road.

His hair was long and mangy and his face was dark with soot. People like him didn't have homes. They were far below the commoners in social standing. He hadn't addressed us like that because he knew we were members of the aristocracy, he would have done the same to anyone—I mean, who would object to being mistaken for an aristocrat?

Emma went to him immediately, purse in hand. “It's not much, but get yourself a warm meal.”

Normally people just ignored folks like him—if you let them talk, they just keep going and going—but I’ve never seen Emma turn down someone in need.

“You really never change, huh?” I asked as we went on our way.

“I just happen to come from a slightly more fortunate family, that’s all.”

“Yeah, and I just happen to be from a family of struggling nobles. Should I cry about it?”

“Ooh, there, there, poor baby.”

“Wow, this is what I get?”

While we were fooling around, a troubled voice called out behind us: “Thief! Someone, help!”

I couldn’t believe it! Someone had snatched Emma’s money from that homeless man. The culprit ran off in the opposite direction—he must’ve been keeping an eye on us.

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch him!” Emma shouted.

“No, Emma, let me handle this.”

“But, Noir...”

“Stone Bullet.”

Pew! Ka-thunk!

My projectile landed square in the middle of the culprit’s back, knocking him flat onto his face. Other people jumped in to pin him to the ground, and the money was returned to the old man.

Emma stared at me in shock. “Wow! Wow?! How can you use that spell?!”

“Well, you know what they say, take your eyes off a boy for a few days and you never know what you’ll find.”

“But we just saw each other yesterday!”

“The point is: I’m growing.”

“And that stone looked bigger than usual too...”

She wasn’t wrong about that. I’d increased the stone’s size to about a foot in

diameter. It seemed like the power of the spell had gone up too. The magic cost wasn't that significant, so I'd say my experiment was a resounding success.

"Well, I ought to get home," I said. "I have to prepare for the Hero Academy exam tomorrow."

"You're taking it?!"

"Yup. Anyway, see ya."

I thought about stopping by the dungeon, but I was a little tired, so I decided to go home.

That night, I knocked on my little sister's door. I figured it was worth finding out if I could use her to replenish LP.

Alice opened her door. "Whatever do you need, brother dearest?"

"I have a request."

"Oh, do tell. I will do anything I can for you, and gladly."

"Would you let me rest my head in your lap?"

"Y-your what?!"

"I want to rest my head in your lap."

"O-oh, I thought you had said something else for a moment... Uh, um, sure!"

I thanked her and made my way into her room. I hadn't been in there in almost a year, but I remained impressed with its tidiness. Alice was still a little baffled by the request, but she indulged me nonetheless, netting me 30 LP. It wasn't as much as I'd gotten from Emma, but I appreciated it all the same.

"I feel so much better," I said as I thanked her.

"If doing this sort of thing helps you, you can ask me any time, brother."

"So you wouldn't mind if I asked you to be my hug pillow?"

"Whaa?! I mean, of course not!"

"You're such a sweet, adorable little sister, Alice."

430 LP → 500 LP

The fact that the LP generation function worked with my little sister meant it didn't have particularly discerning parameters. I guess I shouldn't have expected anything else, given who I'd inherited it from. I resolved to see my master again soon.



500LP

↑ 430LP

My heart pounded as I walked through the marble archway. Several guards stood beside the gate to the Hero Academy, checking everyone as they entered. I wore a metal badge shaped like a silk hat—the symbol for a member of a baronet’s family. The colors and shapes varied depending on your social class, so you could tell who you were dealing with at a glance.

I may have been on the bottom rung, but I was still a member of the aristocracy, so I was allowed to enter without comment. Academy students didn’t get privileges based on their social class, but you had to become a student for that to apply.

Today was the final exam, the preliminary one having been held a few days prior. Commoners had to take that first and could only sit the final exam if they passed. As a noble, I had a free pass to the finals.

Once I’d registered, I headed onto the campus. I was shocked at how many people were already there—around three hundred total, nobles and commoners alike. The school only took 120 people in four classes per year, so over half of the people present wouldn’t make it.

“I’m so grateful you’ve all taken the time to come out here today. I know you have bright futures ahead of you.”

The president of the school greeted us from a podium. He was an older man, but his eyes were sharp and his build sturdy, giving him an air of majesty. I’d heard he used to be a top-class dungeon seeker. He quickly moved on from greetings to explain what was to come.

“The final exam is split into two sections, and your combined score will determine whether you pass. I’ll get right to the first section.”

Now this was the part I didn’t expect—apparently the first section was a team battle! We could pick our own teammates, but that put me in a bit of a pickle—how was I supposed to pick?

“Nooooir! I’m here!”

“What?!”

Emma skipped over, outfitted with a dagger and everything.

“What are you doing here?!” I exclaimed.

“I thought I’d take the exam too. Being unemployed isn’t the best look, you know?”

“I guess,” I agreed. “I mean, people really hate it when aristocratic kids don’t work.”

“Anyway! Let’s team up! I’m as strong as a hundred men! Ah ha ha!”

Honestly? I was glad she showed up. Unlike me, Emma was proficient in combat. Just as I was considering who our third should be, a beautiful girl with long black hair came up to us.

“Wanna team up?”

Her voice was smooth and confident. The thought of rejecting her didn’t even cross my mind. I noticed the badge on her chest—she was an earl’s daughter! No wonder a bottom-rung noble like me was bowled over by her presence.

“S-sure! We would love to, your ladyship,” Emma answered before I had a chance.

We really had to watch ourselves with someone of such high status.

“Oh, you don’t need to be so formal. After all, if we pass, we’ll all be equals. You can just call me Shirley. Shirley Nordoir.”

“I’m Noir Stardia.”

“Emma Brightness, at your service, your la... I mean, Shirley.”

“Oh, you’re from the Brightness family? I’ve heard the name. But I’m afraid Stardia is wholly unfamiliar to me.”

Of course it was, we were nobodies, but would it have killed her to pretend?

“Well,” she said. “No matter. This is just a temporary arrangement, after all.”

Her contempt was plain as day. She probably thought she was doing me a favor by teaming up. I felt my chest tighten.

“The first section of the exam starts now!” the president declared. “You have

until 6 p.m. to harvest raw materials. Your scores will be determined by what you manage to collect. You may use any method you see fit. Begin!”

When the president gave the signal, everyone sprang into action. Some people even broke into a run.

“We should split up and collect things on our own. Do me a favor and try not to screw this up, okay?” The earl’s daughter may have been a real beauty—she was slender, her skin as white as snow, and she had the most delicate facial features—but she was haughty.

I forced a smile. “I’ll do my best. I hope you will too, Lenore.”

“Noir, what are you saying? Her name is Shirley.” Emma looked at me, baffled. She hadn’t realized the girl was lying to us. I couldn’t blame her. I was the one who’d used Discerning Eye.

Meanwhile, Lenore’s eyes went wide, and I flashed another smile.

“Not sure what you were thinking, giving your teammates a fake name, but do me a favor and try not to screw this up, okay?” I turned around and walked off while she stood there, still dumbfounded. I paused for one last snipe. “By the way, I know you’re trying real hard to look cool, but you’ve got spinach in your teeth.”

“What?!”

“Hey! Noir! I mean, yeah, I noticed that too, but there are some things you just don’t say!”

But Emma, it’s only polite to respond to a poison tongue in kind!

Chapter 5:

That Score Can't Be Right!

EMMA AND I left the school and I wandered around town with no particular destination in mind.

"I was thinking, couldn't we just buy materials?" Emma mused.

"Sounds good to me."

After all, it was the main strategy of monied nobles. It reminded me of just how much of an advantage the rich had in this test. I mean, the president never said anything about defeating monsters for their resources—we just had to harvest raw materials.

"The aristocracy really has a leg up in this thing, huh?"

"Well, what do you expect?" Emma asked. "There are too many qualified applicants."

There was a stereotype that the nobility were incompetent morons who were only important by virtue of their lineage, but generally, we were more accomplished than you'd think. Kids born into noble families had so much time and money spent on them that it was pretty uncommon to end up totally useless. The real upper-crust families took steps to help their kids before they were even born. They used magic items to make sure their children came into the world with special skills. But superior ability didn't always go hand-in-hand with a good personality, as illustrated by that Lenore girl with her intense superiority complex.

"We'll take all your goblin hands and as many kobold ears and tails as you have!" Emma said to the merchant.

I was impressed, watching Emma buy up as many raw materials as she could.

"You sure are buying a lot, milady," said the merchant.

"Heh, well, what else is a girl to do when her father lends her his wallet? Though it does look like things are starting to sell out."

“Seems like a good sales day.”

“You don’t seem very concerned, Noir. If you’re going hunting, I’ll go with you.”

“Nah, I’m going on my own. You just wait in town. You probably won’t need to buy anything else either.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? How are you going to pull that off?”

“Now that’s my little secret. Catch ya later.”

I bought a bag on my way out and headed to the dungeon.

After I’d collected some more golden slime jelly—boosting me to Level 23—I headed to the second floor to see my master.

<There’s my little pupil! I knew you’d wanna try it out a little.> “It really is easy to get LP by interacting with the fairer sex.”

<Want me to tell you an even more effective way to do it?> “Absolutely.”

<Okay, but you’re going to have to entertain me first.>

She was being silly again, but I didn’t think she’d tell me if I didn’t come up with something, so I borrowed one of my father’s dirty jokes. “Some words of wisdom from my father, then: there are two types of people—those with hair on their asses and those without!”

<Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Your dad’s a genius! He’s totally right! I’m the latter, by the way—not a hair in sight! What about you, Noir?> “No comment.”

<Oh, I see, so you’ve got a jungle down there, huh?>

“My butt is as smooth as a baby’s, thank you very much!”

<Pfft! Ah ha ha ha ha ha! What kind of man are you?!>

Ugh, she got me. I needed to work on my comeback reflexes. However, she agreed to teach me another way to get LP.

<There are a few really easy ways: like if you eat a delicious dish made from strange ingredients, or if you have kinky sex, or just go on a big shopping spree.>

“None of those seem particularly relevant to me.”

<People change, man. I was a simple country girl once.>

Her argument was unfortunately compelling. At any rate, I decided to tell her that I was taking the Hero Academy entrance exam, and found out to my surprise that my master was an alumna.

“We’re supposed to come back with raw materials from monsters, but maybe the golden slimes are the wrong move?”

<They were rare enough even back in my day. It’ll probably invite a lot of questions.> Which meant I could score too high, or worse. I didn’t want to get the reputation for being some kind of overachiever, so I really didn’t have any choice but to find another, less obviously weird monster.

“Maybe I’ll swing by the third floor then.”

<Have fun! Come right back if it gets too dangerous.>

“See you, then.”

On the second floor, all the monsters were neatly contained in individual rooms. Because I couldn’t be sure there weren’t more traps like the one that had ensnared my master for the last two hundred years, I found the stairs and headed down. The third level didn’t look all that different, but I proceeded down the hall with caution.

Going left or right led me to the same big, open space. I could see another hall in the back, and a dark mass floating near it. It looked like some kind of monster clad in black rags...with an extremely creepy lack of legs. White bones flashed under tattered cloth. Pitch black voids gazed from where eyes should have been. A massive scythe hung in its skeletal hands. Even from across the vast room, I could tell it was a profoundly dangerous enemy.

Name: Dead Reaper

Level: 99

Skills: Execution Slash

Execution Slash: Damage dealt with Scythe inflicts Instant Death on target. Effect cannot be avoided unless target has specific protection against Instant Death.

Yikes. I didn't stand a chance. I should have turned back, but I really needed to pass the entrance exam. I quickly gave up on editing Execution Slash, since it cost more LP than I'd ever had at one time to date. Instead, I created the skill Heavy and Bestowed it on the creature. All in all, the plan cost me 200 LP. I was instantly overcome with a dragging feeling of exhaustion.

I grit my teeth. "Grr, sometimes the only way out is through."

I guess the skill must've worked, because the creature's movements seemed sluggish, but then again, maybe it was always slow-moving. Could it have only cost 100 LP to Bestow Heavy because it was already highly compatible with the enemy's makeup? No time for doubts. I fired off a stone bullet.

Pew! Ka-thunk!

I landed a direct hit on the scythe, which sent it spinning out of the reaper's hands. Next, I produced another stone bullet, as hefty as I could afford. It moved a lot slower than the smaller projectile, but the enemy's speed was significantly reduced, so I made that shot too—right into the middle of its black mass. Bones went flying and scattered across the floor.

Crap. I'm starting to feel dizzy. I must've used up most of my magic.

"Wait, it's not dead yet?"

The creature's skull chattered, and the bones swayed and clattered. I raised my sword, charged, and swung it down as hard as I could on the skull. I had to give my father some credit for how sharp he'd kept the blade—it deftly split the skull in two.

At that, I felt my body heat up again, but it didn't feel like a normal level up. Nervously, I used Discerning Eye, only to find I'd gone up a whole ten levels! I was Level 33.

“Maybe half the skull would be fine for the test...” I still didn’t want to stand out.

Upon closer inspection, the white bones were dotted with creepy black spots, but I was too keyed up to pay them much mind. I shoved everything into my bag and headed back to the second level.

“Master, I, uh, defeated a dead reaper.”

<Wow, Noir, you go, boy! You hardly ever see those on this continent.> I groaned. “You mean this would be weird to bring back too?”

<Pretty much, but they do show up in graveyards and stuff sometimes. It’d be way less weird than one of those golden slimes.> At least I hadn’t completely wasted my time.

<Well, those reapers are basically cannon fodder, anyway. No big deal.> “I guess they would be a cinch if you have protection against Instant Death.”

<So, how are you doing for time?>

“Oh, crap. I’ll see you again soon!”

<I’ll be waiting for you, my sweet Noir!>

I waved her off and left the small room. When I glanced back, her face was still as pale and unmoving as ever. The chains were the only things keeping her alive.

I wonder...if that’s painful. Maybe, someday, I can—

I put the thought out of my mind and headed back aboveground. Someday was someday. I had a test to pass.

“Noir, where were you?!” Emma cried when I caught up with her. “It’s nearly six!”

“Sorry, sorry, let’s hurry back.”

We dashed the rest of the way to the academy. Somehow, we managed to get our bags of materials turned in before we ran out of time. The results wouldn’t be announced until the following day, so I was about to go home when Lenore, our third team member, stopped me.

“You collected materials, right?” she said.

“What do you think?”

She sniffed. “I see. Well, no matter, I suppose I can carry our team all by myself.”

“Did you skip the day in kindergarten where you were supposed to learn the word ‘team’ or something?”

She glared daggers at me. The whole encounter reaffirmed my taste for modest women.

“I do have to wonder where you learned my name. Or who taught you to make such *incredibly* rude comments.”

“What comments?”

“L-Look,” she said. “You know exactly what I mean, when you said I-I...”

Oh, right, when she had food stuck in her teeth.

“Pretty sure you’re just as guilty of being rude,” I told her. “Why don’t we try being a little nicer next time?”

“Well excuse me!” she snapped. “I’ll make you regret it if you drag our score down!”

“I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, too.”

She was pretty upset, but I just waved and walked away. However, Emma was unusually worried on our way home.

“Are you sure it’s gonna be okay? Like, you don’t think she’s gonna do something weird because she’s mad, do you? Maybe I should go apologize on your behalf.”

“It’ll be fine. I know we’ll score well.”

I hoped so, at least, even if I couldn’t help worrying. With a skill like Execution Slash, that dead reaper had to be worth something. It had to.

I didn’t find out how right I was until the next day, when the president announced the scores.

“Third place, Team Genos with 5,890 points!”

All the groups below 10th place had three-digit scores, so that sounded about right. Although, I couldn't help but notice that our team still hadn't been called.

“Second place, Team Elizabeth with 11,550 points!”

Cheers burst from the crowd. The score was way higher this time. I mean, that number was just monstrous—how valuable were the materials they gathered?

“W-wait, what's going on? Why hasn't our team been called yet?” Lenore muttered.

“Y-yeah, you don't think they forgot us, do you, Noir?” Emma asked.

Honestly, I was as shaken as Lenore and Emma. In fact, I was sweating bullets. This could be bad...monstrously, disastrously bad.

“And now for first place... This one's for the history books: Team Lenore with 128,000 points!”

Eep. That score was so beyond anyone's expectation that the announcement was met with dead silence.

“The number is no mistake,” the president continued. “They had the remains of a most dreadful creature, a dead reaper, among their materials, and were scored accordingly!”

So, it was my fault. AUGH! I knew it. I thought you said those reapers were cannon fodder, Master!

Chapter 6:

A Poor Noble's Gotta Eat

WE HAD ABOUT THIRTY MINUTES until the second half of the exam. The moment the break started, our team got rushed from all sides by the rest of the prospective student body.

"Lady Lenore! How did you find that dead reaper? It's absolutely incredible that you defeated it without so much as a scratch!"

"Oh no, I..."

I bailed before anyone could turn to me and retreated all the way to an abandoned corner of the campus. Emma followed on my heels and offered me a lunch box. Even back in prep school, she'd always made me lunch.

"Thanks again," I said.

"Oh, it's no big deal. I, um, I have to know, though, did you really defeat that dead reaper, Noir?"

"I did, but I can't tell you anything more."

"Hm. I thought so. You've been getting strong *really* fast lately. Does it have something to do with your Great Sage skill?"

"Nope. I just happened to find a good mentor."

"Is...this mentor a woman?"

"Yup. Why?"

"Hmph. I knew you were being cold."

Emma pouted and stole one of my sides. I tripped over myself trying to explain that there was nothing going on, but Emma remained put out. Before I could clarify the situation (not that easy without admitting to the whole weirdness factor), the second half of the exam began.

For this stage, we had to demonstrate our skills and get scored on our performance. There were several proctors scattered about the field, standing

by to judge us.

“Next, Noir Stardia.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I see you were on the first-place team. What are you going to do?”

“Good question, actually.”

I really shouldn't have been surprised that I'd attracted a lot of attention. There were far more people surrounding the members of our team than the others. Honestly though, at this point I didn't really have to try for a high score. The exam results were based on your total from the first and second halves. I could totally half-ass it and still make S-Class.

“I'll fire a Stone Bullet,” I decided.

“Gimme your best shot.”

I shot off a stone bullet at a dummy that looked like a scarecrow. I at least made sure it hit.

“W-wait, wasn't that stone a little too small?!”

“Maybe my magic's a little weak, sadly. I can't make a very powerful one.”

“I thought Stone Bullet had a fixed size... Huh.”

The president was at a loss for words as he scribbled my score down. The spell may have been nonstandard, but I figured it wouldn't get me any unnecessary extra points. At any rate, the second half of the exam was now over, at least for me. The rest was out of my hands.

A few hours later, we gathered on the field, waiting for academy badges to be distributed to those who'd passed. To no surprise, Emma, Lenore, and myself all got one.

“Third place: Noir Stardia. Second place: Emma Brightness. First place: Lenore Bludon!”

I was right, we really did over-perform in the first half. My instincts to half-ass it in the second part were bang on. I really, really didn't want to attract any more attention than I already had.

As if on cue, Ms. Number One, Lenore, descended on me. “Noir! Were you the one who defeated that dead reaper?”

“Honestly, I have the memory of a gnat. I can barely remember what happened to me three minutes ago.”

“Did you steal that line from your grandpa?” Emma muttered.

“Regardless,” I said, and held out my hand. “You got the top spot, Ms. Lenore. Congratulations. I know we got off to a rocky start, but we’re going to be in the same class, so personally, I’d like to get along. Not that you should force yourself.”

“I need do nothing of the sort. But I really ought to apologize for my rudeness earlier. I underestimated you because of your status, and I cannot deny that.”

I was surprised by her honesty. She even shook my hand, and happily agreed to take credit for slaying the dead reaper when I asked her to.

“In terms of raw ability, I could have defeated it anyway, so I will do you this favor.”

“My thanks.”

What I was really grateful for was that Lenore was a bit of a braggart. All in all, I was in a pretty good mood. At least, I was until I got to the Academy’s front desk.

“Congratulations on passing the entrance exam. Please be sure to have your tuition of 300,000 rels ready before the entrance ceremony next week.”

“That...sure is a lot of money.”

“Given the additional special curriculum for our S-Class students, their costs are higher. But as a member of the aristocracy, surely money isn’t—”

“Y-yeah, of course. It won’t be a problem...”

“Once your tuition is paid, the materials you gathered for the test will be returned.”

I trudged home in a deep depression. I knew my parents would scrounge up the money if only I asked, but I dreaded being any more of a burden. Three

hundred grand was cheap, even super cheap, to most noble families, but not ours.

If I told my father the new price tag of my education, he'd try to play it cool at first, but pretty quickly he'd start getting nervous. Then my mother would chime in, offering to cut into our already meager food budget and apologizing to my little sister because we'd have to scrimp. To top it all off, my father said he was going somewhere on business this month, so he'd definitely have to figure out more ways to avoid additional expenses.

"What if my family lends you the money?" Emma asked. She was an angel, as always, and she knew all about the Stardia family's financial situation.

I shook my head. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I want to pay my own way."

I had some ideas already, though I was pretty sure I'd cause a bit of an uproar if I just started selling golden slimes, so I'd have to find another way.

+ 400 LP

Wait, why did my LP increase? Was it because my desire to pass the exam was fulfilled? Newly invigorated by my success, I started to ponder which adventurer's guild I should join.

Ultimately, I decided to drop in on the biggest guild, Odin. They had a lot of highly skilled adventurers, so the scope of their activities was quite broad. They did everything from harvesting botanicals to culling monsters and exploring dungeons.

I opted for adventuring mostly because it was the fastest route to make money—you got paid immediately after completing a request. Plus, it couldn't hurt to do some networking. That could lead to jobs or favors to cash in later. I had to be on the lookout for that kind of thing now. At any rate, there was an abundance of reception desks inside the guild hall. I headed to one and asked about applying.

“We do have an entrance exam, if you’re interested?” said the receptionist.

“I am.”

“Follow me, please.”

“Wow, you guys don’t waste any time, do you?”

“You would have to take the exam regardless, so there really isn’t much point in delaying. Sorry, but this is all part of the audition process.”

“Do what you have to.”

We moved out into the backyard, where the guild kept an outdoor training camp. That was pretty typical of places like this on the outskirts of town.

“Mr. Gamon, we have an applicant.”

“Bring ’im over.” Gamon was a man in his thirties with long wavy locks and a stylish beard. He spun a long polearm around his fingers and slammed the end into the ground with a mighty thunk. “You a noble’s kid?”

“I’m the son of Baronet Stardia, sir.”

“I appreciate the courtesy and all, but we don’t much care about social standing around here. If you don’t got a basic level of problem-solving, I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

“Understood. I hope I don’t disappoint, sir.”

“I like the cut of your jib, kid. You’ve got three minutes to force a sound outta me.”

Make a sound? I cocked my head to the side, puzzled.

“If it comes outta my throat, it counts—could be a scream, a moan, or a laugh. Anything.”

“So, I’m not just supposed to fight you?”

“That’s what most people do, but the other day this kid told me this hilarious story and I burst out laughin’.”

I never would’ve thought of that. They must’ve been exceptionally clever. My best idea was nailing him in the stomach. Adventurers didn’t just need to be

strong, sometimes they needed smarts more than anything. That was the point of this exercise—there's never just one right answer.

“Let's get this going then. Start!”

Gamon gave the signal before I was truly ready. I hastily drew my sword and collected some data on him.

Name: Gamon Chocotiff

Age: 32

Species: Human

Level: 82

Occupation: Adventurer; Brothel Bouncer

Skills: Polearms (Grade B); Lunge; Soil Shield

Oh, did I just spot his weakness?!

Chapter 7:

The Receptionist Doesn't Believe Me!

GAMON WAS HIGH LEVEL, and his skills were combat-oriented. I didn't stand much of a chance against him in a head-on conflict.

Nevertheless, I had a plan. I lowered my guard and started to talk. "So, the thing about me is I've always had a talent for guessing people's personalities just from looking at their faces."

"....."

Gamon tentatively gave me his attention, still holding his polearm at the ready—just what I was hoping for.

"I'm so good, in fact, that I can even guess your job. For example, you, Mr. Gamon, look like you have a side job in addition to adventuring. Let's see..."

I paused to make more of a show of things. I brought my hand to my forehead, as though I was really thinking. Gamon snorted, looking confident.

Well, time to prove him wrong, I thought. "Aha. You work at a brothel... cleaning... No...you're up front. The bouncer."

"Nmph?!"

His eyes went wide and he almost made a sound, but quickly clapped his hand over his mouth.

Damn! All I needed was one little sound and I would've passed! But I didn't have time to mope. I kept talking. "How do you think I know?"

"....."

"I can see everything about a person, and I mean *everything*. Like, for example, I know that you, Mr. Gamon Chocotiff are 32-years-old, Level 82, and your skills are Grade-B Polearms, Lunge, and Soil Shield. I can read your past like a book too."

"....."

At that, his expression shifted, just a little.

Time to press my advantage. I sighed. “Won’t you give me just a little sound? I won’t keep going if you cooperate. I promise. I’ll never, ever reveal your embarrassing past mistakes, Mr. Gamon.”

“.....”

That was my cue to turn toward the receptionist, who was standing off to one side.

“Just remember, you made me do this. I’ll make sure I say it loud enough so everyone can hear! Back when Mr. Gamon was a kid, he—”

“Ngh!”

Gamon rushed over and grabbed me by the shoulders, thinking I was about to expose him. Just what I was waiting for. I grinned and punched him in the crotch.

“Ngah?!”

I didn’t even hit him that hard, but I guess it’s a pretty sensitive area. The unexpected attack made him yelp.

“Looks like you defeated him, Mr. Noir. You pass.” The receptionist smiled.

I wanted to celebrate, but I had to apologize to Mr. Gamon first. “I’m so sorry for using underhanded tactics! I knew I couldn’t beat you head-on, and I didn’t think a hit to the stomach would be enough.”

“I-It’s fine. You did well. And you were right, about everything you said. You startled me and made me approach you with my guard down.”

“Well, you can rest easy. I can’t actually see your past.”

“But if you have Discerning Eye... Actually, never mind. Congratulations. I’m sure you’ll become a great adventurer.”

Apparently, it was pretty rude to question people about their skills if you didn’t know them well, even if they were in your guild. That made sense. There were plenty of people who preferred to keep quiet about that sort of thing.

“Why don’t you come back inside and let me walk you through the

registration process?” the receptionist asked.

“Thank you.”

I returned to the guild hall, feeling triumphant. But a great force grabbed my shoulder—it was Gamon, eyeing me with terrifying intensity. Maybe I really did piss him off?

“I forgot to tell you to drop by my shop, Funbag Forest. We have a nice introductory rate for first-timers. I’ll show you the ropes!” Gamon thumped me twice on the shoulder.

I mumbled something about trying to stop by if I had time and slipped inside.

Maybe joining this guild wasn’t the best idea?

“Congratulations on passing! My name is Lola. I’m a receptionist here at Odin.”

“Nice to meet you, Lola.”

Lola was a real beauty, and she had a calm aura about her. It was kind of hard to believe she wasn’t all that much older than me.

She gave me a simple rundown of the adventurer system at the guild. Adventurers were divided into six ranks based on their accomplishments: E, D, C, B, A and S—with E being the lowest and S the highest. It went without saying that I was starting at the bottom. It was still one more title I could tack on to my name: third son of a baronet, the lowest-ranking noble, and now adventurer of the lowest rank!

None of that was really brag-worthy, was it?

“The rules are relatively lax, but even E-Rank members are required to take on at least one request every three months,” Lola explained. “If you don’t pull your weight, the guild master might have to teach you a painful lesson.”

“Please, no.” I started to wonder if becoming a shut-in might be preferable to this potentially painful lifestyle.

“He he. I was half-kidding.”

Only half? I was intrigued by Lola's sense of humor.

At that point, she handed me a piece of parchment and a pen. It looked like your basic, run-of-the-mill personal information form.

"Only guild staff members have access to your information," she said, "and we'll never reveal it to other adventurers, so you know it's in safe hands." What she really meant was that the guild wouldn't reveal that you were a deserter, or if your parents were ruined nobles, or if you had a criminal record or something dicey like that.

"I'm proud of my status as a son of the Stardia family. I have nothing to be embarrassed about," I said, trying to show off.

Lola looked decidedly unimpressed. "That's all well and good, but I was referring to your skills. Please fill out the spaces here and here."

"Oh, that... How embarrassing."

"Oh, you have nothing to be embarrassed about. Your abilities are quite impressive. But...perhaps you should keep them to yourself."

"Huh? Why?"

I was starting to worry about what kinds of issues Discerning Eye could cause, but Lola brought her face close to mine. She smelled so good I could barely stand it.

"It might make you a little *too* popular," she whispered in my ear.

"Isn't that a good thing?" I mumbled.

"Oh, I didn't mean with women."

"You're embarrassing me again."

"I mean that, if you want to form a party, you might attract some unsavory characters. You're new here, so you don't know the people in the guild yet."

It finally clicked. Forming a strong party was about more than just raw ability. Having a compatible mix of personalities was important too. The most important thing was to find people that you got along with, and who you could trust. But since I had only just joined, I didn't really know anyone. Lola was

trying to advise me not to form a party until I had a better handle on the local crowd.

“I guess I’ll have to keep quiet about my abilities for now, then.”

“I’m glad you understand. We’ll protect your privacy. Your skill will not be divulged to anyone without your express permission, Mr. Noir.”

My fears assuaged, I dutifully filled out the form, listing my skills one after the other. Honestly, I was a little unsure about whether I should mention my master’s skill set. I did give a little thought to how I could explain it away, but of all the people in the guild, I was at least beginning to feel like I could trust Lola.

“What?! Is this Great Sage skill of yours...”

“It’s not exactly the most useful skill, unfortunately.”

“What?! W-wait?! Mr. Noir?!”

“Yes?”

“Parchment is a limited resource, so I’d appreciate it if you took this a little more seriously.”

“But I am being serious.”

There was a good chance she’d never even seen skills like the ones I’d scrawled out before. Unfortunately, my lazy explanations might have just confused her even more.

“Though I do, uh, have the occasional habit of...exaggerating my abilities. I figure it could help me get in with a good party.” I hastily tried to explain that since powerful skills were popular, it’d make it easier to join the party I wanted.

Lola seemed to buy my story. “And that’s why I’m telling you I think you overdid it a little.”

“I guess you’re right. I mean, who even knows what Get Creative and Editor are anyway.”

“Oh, no you don’t. I’m not that stupid.”

Wait, she knows what they are?

Lola pointed to a flag that adorned the hall’s interior. The crest, modeled after

Odin, was genuinely cool. It was probably the symbol of the guild.

“This is Odin. The guild *the* Olivia Servant used to belong to.”

“My master was in this guild?!” I clapped my hand over my mouth. *Oh, crap.*

Lola’s eyes grew ice cold. “Mr. Noir, this doesn’t happen very often, but people do occasionally come in here claiming to be Olivia’s successor.”

“Ugh.”

“But, you know what, Mr. Noir? Their lies always get caught. No matter what.”

“Okay, but I’m not lying.”

“You really had me going for a while...” Lola looked at me with pained eyes, then retrieved something from behind the counter. It was a blue diary. Or at least a book that looked like one. It had a weirdly fascinating quality. “He he. You’re probably wondering what this is.”

“Your powers of perception are humbling.”

“Well, listen up, because this is no ordinary diary. It’s a Discerning Tome.”

I didn’t have to be a genius to guess what that name meant. It likely presented accurate information on any person who touched it. I sighed. “If you had something like that, I wish you would’ve opened with it instead of dragging this out.”

She wagged her finger at me and clicked her tongue. “This is a magical item. It can only be used so many times, so we only use it on untrustworthy people.”

“Oh, so you’re calling me untrustworthy?”

“I dunno, are you ready to recant your claims?”

Despite her provocation, I was telling the truth. I didn’t really have much choice. Because I refused to back down, Lola settled on having the tome do its thing.

“Please touch this page.”

“Okay, but what are you gonna do if it turns out I’m not lying?”

“I’ve been working as a receptionist here for 683 days and my instincts have never led me astray. But on the off chance you aren’t lying...I’ll lift up my skirt and beg you for forgiveness.”

Wow, Lola is bold.

With that, I placed my finger on the tome and the blank page filled with glowing blue letters—precisely detailing everything from my age, to my level, to all my increasingly numerous skills.

“.....”

Lola froze. It must’ve been hard for her to believe.

“Y-y-y-y-you’re really Olivia’s s-s-s-successor...”

“Come on, you’re blowing this out of proportion. Now, remind me, what was it you said you’d do? Lift up your skirt and pledge your undying love for me?”

“Oh, no, no, no, no...”

Lola’s hands quivered. She had completely lost that air of cool collectedness. But she didn’t seem like the type to go back on her word. She came out from behind the counter and looked at me with pleading eyes, begging for mercy, but I just turned my head. This is why you shouldn’t write checks you’re not prepared to cash.

Resigned to her fate, Lola reached for the hem of her skirt and lifted it, exposing her panties. They were white with a small ribbon in the middle. Very cute.

“I believe the phrase I’m looking for is, ‘I pledge my undying love to you, Master Noir.’”

I was pretty sure that wasn’t what she’d actually promised, but she looked like she’d do literally anything, so I couldn’t resist. Her cheeks were bright red.

“I-I-I-I-I pledge my undying love to you, M-M-M-Master Noir. Waaah!”

Why did you have to start crying?! I was starting to look like the bad guy, so I begged her to put her skirt back down.

Can’t say I didn’t appreciate the view, though.



Chapter 8:

That Time More Experienced Adventurers Made Fun of Me

400 LP → 700 LP

AFTER LOLA TREATED ME to that visual delight, I was surprised to notice that my LP had gone up by 300 points. I guess that encounter did have an erotic quality, and Lola was pretty darn attractive. Maybe the amount depended on how into it I got.

“On the topic of requests, what are you looking for?” Lola asked, taking psychological shelter in a return to her normal, businesslike tone.

“Well, I need 300,000 rels by next week. Is that crazy?”

“It’s not...impossible. Our D-Rank members have jobs that pay that much.”

Which meant I needed to go up a rank, and I’d need to start by completing several E-Rank jobs.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” she said. “Each job is assigned a points total, and once you accumulate a certain number of points, you go up a rank. However, the point values aren’t public, and any excess points earned when you go up a rank are rendered void.”

So the point values of two E-Rank requests might be different. I guess it wouldn’t be fair to award the same amount for picking litter and exterminating monsters.

“Okay, let me get this straight. For the sake of argument, let’s say that E-Rank requests are worth between 0 and 99 points and D-Rank ones are worth between 100 and 199. If the bar for advancing to D-Rank was 100 points, then the most efficient way to get there would be completing two 50-point E-Rank tasks. On the other hand, 10-point tasks might be easier to complete, but they would take more time.”

“Mr. Noir, I shouldn’t have expected any less of a noble like you. You catch on quick.”

From the look on her face, it seemed like I’d earned at least a little bit of respect. Good. My mother had drilled reading, writing, and arithmetic into me from a young age.

“But I should warn you, you’ll be docked a significant amount of points if you fail to complete a request, and there may even be additional charges for any trouble caused.”

They must’ve implemented that rule because of adventurers who abandoned requests on a whim or took jobs with no intention of completing them. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Adventuring attracted some less-than-savory personalities. A number of the upper-class nobles didn’t have a very high opinion of the profession either.

“If you put your trust in me,” Lola said. “I can have you at D-Rank in five days.”

“Please do!”

“It might be a little hard, though.”

“Even so!”

I had to earn that 300,000 rels, no matter what. With the skills I had, I figured I’d come up with something. I was trying to stay optimistic.

“Very well. I’d suggest starting with this one.”

Lola showed me a request ticket for a delivery of six goblin wrists. It paid 8,000 rels. Not a lot, but it was probably pretty decent for an E-Rank request. I decided to trust Lola’s expertise. Goblins were plentiful and appeared all over the place, so it was unlikely that I’d have to go home empty-handed.

“I would recommend going to the Arrone Plains. You’ll find many weak, isolated individuals there.”

“Thanks for the advice. I appreciate it.”

“You have three days to complete the request. There are no fees for failure, but if you want to make it to D-Rank, you’ll want to finish it today.”

“I’ll get it done if it kills me.”

“Well, try not to *actually* get yourself killed, okay?”

“Of course not.” I was known to have a bit of a yellow streak. Crashing headfirst into danger wasn’t really my style.

“Good luck. I have high hopes for you, Mr. Noir.”

“I’ll do my best not to disappoint!”

Lola gave me the receipt. I thanked her and left the guild hall. On my way out, a paper posted on a wall near the reception desks caught my eye. It had a bar graph and scores of some sort. There were a number of names on the page, too. Lola’s was among them. I had to wonder what it was for. *Are the other names those of the other receptionists? What are they getting points for?* I decided I’d ask when I delivered the goods.

I hurried through the town’s southern gate and off to the Arrone Plains. It was just a few miles, not much farther than the hidden dungeon. That said, it was already afternoon, so I had to hurry or it’d get dark, and the dark attracted far more ferocious monsters.

When I arrived at the plains, I spread my arms wide and took a moment to watch the breeze dancing through the grass, drinking in the soothing atmosphere.

“The breeze feels really nice today.”

Not that I had time to relax much after that. Since I needed six wrists, in theory I only needed to take down three goblins. I started wandering around looking for my prey, but the plains were disappointingly empty.

While there may not have been any goblins, I did find myself confronted with what looked like a party of adventurers—two men and two women. I used my Discerning Eye just to be sure, and I was right. The four of them were all in their twenties and not much higher level than myself. Maybe a pair of couples? Or maybe they were all just colleagues.

“Hey, you, are you new to the adventuring gig?”

I was a little startled when one of them called out to me. They were all smiling

and seemed really friendly. Something about this group of attractive men and kind women made me feel like I could trust them.

“I am,” I confirmed. “I came to hunt some goblins.”

“I thought as much. You find a lot of weaker ones here, so we get a lot of newcomers showing up.”

“Have you seen any around?”

“Before I answer that, tell me, who are you with?”

“Odin.”

My response abruptly wiped the smiles from their faces, and replaced them with expressions of pure, unadulterated hostility. The men spat on the ground and started posturing—licking their blades—while the women were quick to vocalize their disdain.

“Wow, Odin? If you were trying to make us laugh, you did it.”

“Nice guild you got yourself attached to. I thought you looked like a scrawny little weakling.”

What is with these people? Who does a total 180 like this? I wondered. Perhaps they were members of a rival guild. “Um, if you don’t mind my asking, what guild are you all part of?”

“Lahmu, duh. It’s produced tons of legendary adventurers, like Iris the Great!”

Oh boy. It was guild rivalry after all. You hear about this sort of thing among the nobility too. As a member of a lowly baronet’s family, it wasn’t something I had a lot of direct experience—no one thought it worth their time to posture at the likes of me. But, to some people, being part of the right clique is more important than life itself. Either way, I didn’t care for their sudden aggression.

“You know,” I said. “We may be members of rival guilds, but don’t you think you’re being a little rude?”

“Wow, this kid sure is uppity.”

“Maybe he’s just a little confused. I mean he did show up here alone, despite being a total newcomer.”

“I bet he’s an Oliva fanboy. Pathetic, really, considering what trash she was.”

“Don’t you say another word against my master!” The words boiled right out of me. *Oh crap. I let it slip again.*

I was worried that I’d accidentally divulged my relationship to her, but then I remembered that, as far as anyone else was concerned, my master was long dead. Consequently, I was met with uproarious laughter.

“Your master? Oh my god, this kid is delusional!”

“Yiiikes! I mean yikes, kid!”

I was actually mad. Like, really, seethingly mad. It must’ve shown on my face.

“Hey, guys,” said one of the men. “I think we teased him a little too much. Don’t worry, kid, I’ll tell you where to find some goblins. You just have to take us along with you—we really wanna see how Odin’s adventurers fight.”

He promised they’d stay out of my way and even offered to help if I got myself into trouble, but I knew what they were really after. They wanted something to laugh at. I decided to go along with it. I had another show in mind.

“You know, I think I’ll have to take you up on that,” I said.

“Awesome! All right, follow us.”

I followed them, and they took me somewhere where there really were goblins. One wandered right into our path.

“Packs are pretty dangerous for new adventurers, but you should be able to handle one lone goblin, right?” one of them said.

I didn’t respond right away, as I wanted to use my Discerning Eye. If the goblin was unusually strong, I could end up dead or grievously injured. I’d happily take a little teasing to avoid that kind of problem. However, the goblin turned out to be extremely weak. A Level 12, with no skills of particular note. Lola’s information must’ve been spot on. It was a green goblin too; they’re said to be the weakest type.

“All right, I’ll do it,” I said.

“Just try not to embarrass yourself, newbie.”

I approached the goblin, with only a single frustrated glance back at the snickering women. The second the goblin noticed me and attacked, I summoned up a big Stone Bullet. The three-foot diameter stone smashed right into the creature's face.

"Gah?!"

The impact knocked the goblin off its feet. It looked kind of brutal, honestly. If that had been me, my nose would've been broken and my teeth smashed in.

The goblin stopped moving, so I approached with caution. Once I was sure it was unconscious and not playing dead, I swiftly pierced its heart with my sword.

And that's how I killed my first goblin. Once I harvested its wrists, I returned to the dumbfounded Lahmu adventurers.

"W-wasn't that stone a little..."

"But...how? That was a Stone Bullet, wasn't it? How was it that big?"

"What?" I said, feigning disbelief. "You don't know how to make Stone Bullets bigger?! Huh. I thought you were more experienced than me! Wow, just wow."

I teased them as revenge for their earlier treatment and struck a triumphant pose as they stewed. I wasn't going to stand for any more bad-mouthing of my guild or my master.

Chapter 9:

Headache Relief and the Rainbow Grasshopper

AT FIRST, the adventurers from Lahmu seemed to lose interest in teasing me. Instead, they started grilling me about how I made the Stone Bullet bigger. Of course, I wasn't about to tell them. This prompted them to hurl their most pathetic insults yet.

"You're such a stupid dummy, we hope you get eaten by monsters!"

I didn't even know what to say. I mean, how do you respond to such a childish insult? At any rate, they flounced away shortly after, and I was left to roam the plains on my own. It wasn't long before I defeated a second and third goblin. For both, I fell back on my tried and true strategy of knocking them down with a Stone Bullet and finishing them off with my sword.

"And that's all six I need for the request!"

It really was easy to take out low-level enemies with my current skills. If they had been even a little more powerful, they probably could have dodged. That was the thing about leveling—it didn't just make individuals physically potent. Higher levels meant a wealth of experience and knowledge too.

"Ms. Lola! I'm back!"

"Oh! I just knew you'd make it, Mr. Noir." Lola stood up to greet me as I walked into the guild hall and gave me the 8,000 rels reward. Then, curiously, she picked up a bell and started ringing it. "Mr. Noir Stardia has completed his first request!"

Even though it was evening, there were still a number of adventurers in the guild hall. At the sound of the bell, all of them stood and started clapping.

"Congratulations!"

"Now you're really one of us."

“We’re here for you if you ever want to form a party!”

I was unexpectedly overwhelmed with a sense of warmth. I had joined the guild to make money for my tuition, but now I was genuinely happy to be part of it.

“Thank you, everyone! Your support means a lot!”

I bowed and greeted the senior members of the guild. Being recognized as a proper member felt even more amazing. As though I really belonged here.

I assured Lola I’d be back the next day and headed out. The money from completing my first request jangled in my purse. I knew I should save it, but I decided to treat myself just this once and buy something delicious on my way home. But as I was browsing the food stalls on the market street—

“Have you seen Noir?!”

I overheard three people going around begging for news about me. As I approached, I realized they had unusually serious expressions on their faces.

“Father, mother, and even you, Alice? What are you doing here?”

“Whoaaa! Thank goodness, you’re alive!”

“Huh? Whoa!”

The three of them embraced me, stopping the conversation dead in its tracks. When I finally got them to respond to my question, the answer surprised me.

“You never came home!”

“Yeah, we were worried you failed the entrance exam and the shock might have...”

“Made you remove yourself from this world...”

“Why the hell would I do that?!” I thought my family knew me better than that. I wasn’t the kind of person to off myself. As unflattering as it was to admit, I’d rather live a miserable, pathetic life than die. That said, people have died over less, I suppose. Honestly, I was kind of happy they were so concerned for me. “Don’t worry,” I reassured them. “I passed. I ranked third, even.”

“Woaaaaow! N-N-N-Noir, you’re kidding, right?!”

“No father, I’m telling the truth.”

“Tomorrow I’m bragging about this to everyone I know!” My father cheered and threw his fist up toward the sky.

Forget tomorrow, he immediately caught every person who passed by to tell them. I was so embarrassed, I asked the nearby butcher for some chicken as a distraction to try to get my father to calm down.

“Wait, isn’t that the top-grade stuff that costs 5,000 rels?!” my mother asked, beginning to panic.

“Rest easy, mother. That’s not the only news I have for you. I’ve started work as an adventurer, and today, I completed my first request and earned 8,000 rels as compensation. That’s why I was so late getting home.”

“Goodness, you’ve surpassed father’s earnings in a single day, brother dearest!”

“Aliiiiice stop! Don’t destroy your poor father’s dignity!” my father cried, deeply wounded.

Normally, the nobility owned land or had a village somewhere that they could use to generate income, but we weren’t so fortunate. If we didn’t work, we didn’t eat. But my father was a proud man.

“This windfall is all well and good, but I’m still your father and it’s my job to ensure that my children are properly educated. Noir, how much is your tuition?”

“I need 300,000 rels next week.”

“How about...in a month?”

“Father, please. Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay my own way.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

Despite my father’s regrets, the four of us returned home in good spirits and I was able to treat my family to a delicious chicken.

“We had a really juicy request come in today,” Lola told me the following

morning. “You need to catch a rainbow grasshopper.”

“A...rainbow grasshopper?” I stared at the request slip, deep in thought. The rainbow grasshopper was, as the name suggested, a rainbow-colored grasshopper. Their habitat was more or less known, but they were exceedingly difficult to find, so they were a rather infamous creature.

“I’m sure it’ll be a piece of cake for you with your special skill, Mr. Noir.”

“Ah, right!” I’d completely forgotten about my Great Sage skill. I could use it to ask just about any question and get an answer. “Well, I guess I better get going.”

Emma’s face came to mind the moment I stepped out of the guild hall. I had only ever been able to properly use my Great Sage skill with the help of her kisses, but on the off chance, I tried using Get Creative to make the skill Complete Headache Immunity.

Complete Headache Immunity — 5,000 LP

That was insane! With only 700 LP to my name, the skill was completely out of reach. I considered trying it again without the word “complete.” This dropped the cost all the way down to 300 LP, so I figured it was worth a try.

“I wonder how well it’ll work,” I murmured. Even if I did get a headache, maybe it wouldn’t be as intense now. I was a little scared to try though, since there was still a chance it could be awful. I decided I should be near Emma before I tried, just as a backup plan—

“Noir, you big dummy!” Emma always had a way of appearing at just the right moment, and her boobs were as in-your-face as ever. But more to the point, she seemed a little mad about something. “When you said you were going to ‘pay your own way’ yesterday, you meant you were going to become an adventurer?! Why didn’t you invite me?!”

She must’ve stopped by my house and found out from my family. I decided I’d better apologize and make sure I expressed proper remorse. “Sorry...”

“Oh, uh, it’s fine. Don’t get so down about it. I just felt a little left out.”

“Adventuring is dangerous anyway, so I felt weird inviting you.”

“But we’re best friends, aren’t we? Did you forget the promise we made?”

“What, you mean in the park six years ago when I shouted that we’d be attached at the hip until we died?”

“Yes! And it was six years, five months, and twelve days ago.”

That was pretty darn specific. I certainly didn’t remember it that well. It was just some silly childish thing I’d said, but Emma must’ve taken it pretty seriously.

“Are you on a job now?” she asked. “I’m going with you. You can’t stop me.”

“Fine. I’m not going to. Let’s get going.”

All things considered, I was actually glad she’d joined me today. The two of us headed to the Humeur River, where the rainbow grasshoppers lived. The river ran near town and there were hardly any water monsters in the area, so the water was clear and full of fish. That made it a popular fishing spot. However, we weren’t there for the fish, so we walked the shore, combing the grass for grasshoppers.

It wasn’t easy. It was said that you could spend a whole year searching the shore and never spot one of the elusive bugs. Of course, their rarity meant the rainbow grasshoppers fetched a high price at the market, and the reward for this request was fairly impressive to boot. The insect’s only real value was aesthetic, so the request had no doubt come from some bored rich person with money to burn.

When simple searching proved fruitless, I stopped Emma. “I’d like to use my Great Sage skill, but I was wondering, if I...”

“Don’t finish that sentence! You know I’d do it for you any time. I mean, kisses are practically just a greeting after all!” Emma sounded happy. I could rest easy in using my skill with her assistance.

Where is the nearest rainbow grasshopper?

<It is approximately three hundred yards to the south, behind a large

boulder.>

I had a bit of a headache, but nothing I couldn't tolerate, so I tried asking another question.

How many other rainbow grasshoppers are there in a three-mile radius?

<Two.>

My head seemed fine. It didn't hurt any more than after the previous question. I threw in another one, just to test it out, and it really didn't make the headache any worse. What a relief! If that was the worst the headaches would get, it was massive progress. It wasn't even bad enough to hinder me in combat.

"Follow me," I declared. "I know where one is."

Emma balked. "Wait, no kiss?"

"I gave myself Headache Immunity, so I'm fine."

"Aww..."

"I mean, well... Like you said, we're best friends, so, you know, kisses are basically no different from a greeting. Which means we can do them whenever, right?"

That brightened her right up. "Oh! Totally. Let's get going!"

Lo and behold, we found a rainbow grasshopper right where the Great Sage had suggested we would. Its body was striped with brilliant color, and it was a lot faster than a regular grasshopper. It wasn't easy, but with the two of us working together, the bug didn't stand a chance. The second we caught it, I dropped it in a bag and closed it up.

"Apparently, there are another two around here, we should catch them too."

With the help of the Great Sage skill and Emma, it wasn't even very hard. We captured the other two in no time and were heading back into town when she asked me a strange question.

"Hey, so, I think you got a little faster. Did you learn another new skill?"

"Oh, that might just be my level. I'm at 33 now."

“What?! That’s almost double mine.” Emma was at Level 18. “You’re just leaving me in the dust, Noir.”

“Oh, no I’m not.”

“I want to get even stronger too. That settles it, I’m taking the exam to join Odin. And then I’m forming a party with you! Is...that okay?”

“Sure! I don’t mind at all. But let’s deal with this grasshopper first. Didn’t you know some old guy who was really into grasshoppers?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember him! I’ll go fetch him.”

Once we got back to town, I headed to the guild hall and Emma went to get the grasshopper man. He was a bit of a weirdo, but he liked to collect grasshoppers, so of course he was desperate to add a rainbow one to his collection. He’d made a killing in business in the past, so he had plenty of money to indulge in his hobby.

“Wait, did you already catch one?” Lola was surprised to see me so soon. She probably thought it would have been hard to actually capture it, even with the Great Sage skill to help.

“Take one from the bag.”

“You caught three?! T-talk about over-achieving...”

Impressed as she was, Lola processed the catch. It sounded like this one was worth quite a lot of points, getting me pretty close to D-Rank. I even got 50,000 rels as a reward.

“I brought him with me,” Emma called from the entrance.

“Oh, that was quick.”

Emma was already waiting outside the guild hall with the grasshopper man. He was a plump, middle-aged fellow who liked to indulge in the good things in life. I’d met him quite a few times before.

“It’s been a while, Noir,” he said.

“Indeed it has, sir.”

“So, I hear you caught a rainbow grasshopper?”

I opened the bag for him to see the goods and he let out an utterly delighted gasp of joy. “Would you take 100,000 for two?”

“Oh, 100,000 huh...?” That would be 50,000 per grasshopper. That was what I got from filling the guild request, but with no middleman they should have been worth more. I turned to Emma. “Remind me, how much did that other guy say he’d pay again?”

I winked at her. Saying we had an almost telepathic link was probably overstating it, but the two of us had been friends for a long time, so she immediately picked up on what I was doing. “Umm, 290,000 I think.”

“A full 290,000?! That’s insane!” The old man was shocked, but not as shocked as I was. Emma had gone way too high. I was guessing she’d say 150,000 at most. Surely nearly 300,000 was too much, even for this guy.

Plunk.

The man began to line up piles of coins.

“I have 300,000. Will you sell ’em to me for that?”

“They’re yours! Thank you for your patronage!” I responded instinctively with the standard shopkeepers’ script and handed the man the bag.

He looked immensely pleased with himself as he jaunted off. Meanwhile, Emma and I had similar expressions of barely suppressed surprise. I knew rainbow grasshoppers were rare, but it was hard to believe how easily that guy had parted with all this money. I guess the world wasn’t just full of scoundrels and cheapskates. I couldn’t help but envy his wealth, just a little. Though, at least a chunk of it was now mine.

Emma high-fived me. “We did it, Noir!”

“I totally thought you overplayed our hand at first.”

“I knew it would work. He’s loaded.”

“Wait. Doesn’t this mean...” I looked down at the money in my hands. *That...I already have all the funds I need for my tuition?*

Chapter 10:

The Curse Skill

THANKS TO EMMA, I had earned the 300,000 rels in a snap. It was a happy accident, and I awoke the morning after feeling relaxed for the first time since the morning I learned I lost my librarian job. I didn't really have to push myself today, but I headed to the guild hall anyway. Lola's enthusiasm encouraged me to not be lazy.

"Yay! I passed!" Emma, who must've arrived before me, came running as I got to the guild hall. She had passed the entrance exam and become an adventurer herself.

"Who did you get? Mr. Gamon?"

"Yeah, it was him."

"How'd you get him to make a sound?"

"Umm, I just fought him like normal and got him to squeal with a single hit."

"I feel like you're underselling yourself here."

Gamon was over Level 80, more than four times stronger than Emma. Of course, level wasn't everything. I wondered if she'd used some kind of trick, but her next comment immediately clarified things.

"It was weird, because like, the whole time we were fighting, he just kept looking at my chest."

"Oh."

Now that made more sense. Emma's breasts were exceptionally shocking if you weren't used to them. It was only natural for a man to be distracted.

"And after the exam was over, he asked me to come work for him at this weird place."

"Was it called Funbag Forest?"

Gamon must've been trying to scout her for her chest. Maybe running the brothel was actually his main occupation.

“Yeah, that was it. How did you know?”

“Oh, uh, he just invited me to stop by if I was free.”

“Well, did you?” Her expression darkened, and I hastily shook my head. Emma fidgeted, looking up at me like she wanted something. She looked so cute, like a puppy. “Well, um, if you ever wanted to go to a place like that, you know I, um, wouldn’t mind, uh...”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure you’d hate that place Emma.”

“I definitely wouldn’t want to with any other guy, but...if...if you wanted to, Noir, but only you, I...”

“Ahem! Ahem!” Lola cleared her throat loudly.

We’d been talking right in front of her desk, and a line had formed behind us. I’d been so distracted by my conversation with Emma that I didn’t even notice. Everyone was smirking. I was so embarrassed, my cheeks felt like they were casting a fire spell.

Lola scolded us with a disappointed look. “No flirting in front of the reception desks, please.”

“Sorry.”

“What’s the meaning of this anyway? You made me tell you I loved you in that embarrassing position and now you’re into this girl?”

Emma turned on me. “Noir?! You did what?!”

Crap, Emma’s going to get the wrong idea. I tried to explain, but just my luck, Lola threw a whole vat of oil on the fire.

“You know,” she said, “right now, Noir and I are getting pretty serious. Please don’t stick your nose in other people’s business.”

“Hmph!” Emma rounded on her instead. “You sound like you’re trying to pick a fight with me.”

Lola actually did seem to be trying to provoke Emma. Sparks flew as they glared at each other.



“Oooh, somebody’s popular,” someone teased as I stepped between the two girls.

“Anyway,” I said. “I’d like another request today. Please!”

When Lola got to business, she told me about a job to eradicate monsters on the Arrone Plains, but when I mentioned that I’d be forming a party with Emma, she frowned. Apparently, when you completed requests as a party, each member got fewer points than if you completed the request alone. I guess that meant the fastest way to go up a rank was to take on requests by yourself.

Just as we were about to leave, Lola ran out from behind her desk. She smiled and, even more curiously, grabbed my hand. “Say, I’d like to go out to dinner with you soon.”

“Well, are you going with her?” Emma asked.

“You *will* come,” Lola said. “Won’t you?”

Why did they have to put me on the spot like this?! I just smiled and laughed and gave a noncommittal answer even though, if I was being honest, I did want to go.

“You’re such a dummy, Noir,” Emma whined as we walked through the town to the gate. Whenever she complained, it was usually about me. Surely she could do that when I wasn’t around? “Women are devious creatures, you know,” she said. “You oughta be more careful. First she’ll invite you to dinner, but then she’ll lure you to her room and bam! She’s dismembering you.”

The serial killer secretary, huh? I felt like I’d read a book like that a while ago. But I was pretty sure Lola wasn’t a bad person. More importantly, I had no idea how to snap Emma out of this bad mood.

“Lower your head!” she shouted suddenly and smacked me on the shoulder.

She was already in a low bow herself, but I had no idea why. I didn’t know the person in front of us, though I was sure if I’d seen her before, I would’ve recognized her instantly.

She had a different aura from everyone around her—an absolute beauty in a flawless white dress, with shiny blonde hair and enchanting blue eyes. Her skin

was white as snow and she had a figure to die for. She looked as though she'd been blessed by the heavens. She had a mature, adult face, but there was something cute about her. Her looks and the white gown wouldn't have looked out of place on a bride. They fit the pure impression she gave off.

Wh-wh-who is she...?

"Who is she again?" I blurted out. Great going, Noir.

"Oh come on, Noir, she's the daughter of Duke Albert. She even came to the Hero Academy and *most importantly* she's going to be in our class!"

No wonder I didn't recognize her. A duke's daughter was so far beyond my station that I would have tuned her out to keep a respectful distance. Her eyes met mine as I bowed my head, and she smiled at me angelically. I was instantly smitten. She offered me her hand, and I resumed my attempt to bow.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Noir of the Stardias, and Miss Emma of the Brightnesses."

I was completely bowled over; she remembered our names and showed us an appropriate level of respect. The prep school I'd gone to was a mix of nobles and commoners. Most of the nobles looked down on me when they found out I was just a baronet, though really, a lot of them just thought they were better than everyone, period.

"You've got the right person," I responded with a smile.

"I am Maria Fianna Albert, and I am most pleased to make your acquaintance. Though as we are to be classmates, I would appreciate it if you just called me Maria." She brought her hands to her chest, which was full enough to rival Emma's, and bowed. Every gesture was the epitome of elegance and grace.

I was in complete awe—this was how the nobility was supposed to be. "It would be my pleasure," I said.

"Truthfully, I was quite shocked when I observed you in the second half of the exam, Mr. Noir. You produced an unusually small Stone Bullet. To the best of my knowledge, Stone Bullet may vary in velocity depending on the caster, but size variance of that degree is unheard of."

“I guess you could say it’s one of my fortes.”

“You seemed very gifted, so I was most desperate to have an opportunity to speak to you—and here we are, talking by complete coincidence. Perhaps the gods have brought us together.”

“You flatter me. Really, I’m honored to meet you.”

“I look forward to the entrance ceremony at the academy. However, I have some other engagements to attend today, so I must bid you farewell. Good day.”

“Good day, my lady.”

She turned and walked away, trailed by a number of guards and butlers. She was so beautiful, polite, and graceful it was hard to believe we were the same age. It looked like she’d even charmed Emma.

“Wow, she’s so pretty up close,” Emma murmured. “And her skin is so clear.”

“She’s almost too perfect. She was even respectful toward us.”

“Yeah... It was kind of fun to use ‘good day’ for once though.”

“I probably use it even less than you do.”

My eyes trailed Maria’s departure as we spoke. My curiosity got the best of me and I called up my Discerning Eye.

Name: Maria Fianna Albert

Age: 16

Species: Human

Level: 30

Occupation: Student

Skills: One-Handed Swordsmanship (Grade B); Charge; Heal; Sixteenth Year Death Curse

One-handed Swordsmanship was a pretty popular skill, but it was the Grade B part that made it impressive. Charge allowed the user to charge an attack and

unleash an especially powerful strike. Heal was a standard recovery spell. But that last one...

“Emma, have you ever heard of the skill Sixteenth Year Death Curse?”

“Huh? Never heard of it.”

I thought as much. I didn’t know anything about it, either. I tried using Discerning Eye to look up more details.

Sixteenth Year Death Curse: A curse skill. Causes the owner’s entire body to be wracked with intense pain at regular intervals. The symptoms worsen as the skill owner ages, peaking in their sixteenth year. The skill disappears if the owner makes it through their sixteenth year.

Wait a second, doesn’t that mean that someone placed the curse on her? My heart pounded in my ears.

Given the skill description it, sounded like the curse would lift once she turned seventeen, but first she had to “make it through her sixteenth year.” What did that mean? Dying? I was a little shell-shocked. I had so many questions, I unconsciously turned to the Great Sage.

What are the chances of someone with a Sixteenth Year Death Curse making it past age sixteen?

<0.000001%>

“What the hell...?” I murmured.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, uh, nothing, just...thinking about that thing our prep school homeroom teacher used to say.”

“‘The better you are, the younger you die. Which is why I work myself to death to make sure these youngsters survive.’ Something like that?” Emma asked.

“Yeah, that’s the one. There was something about that phrase that I always

liked.”

Then and there, I decided to do whatever I could to help Maria.

Chapter 11:

I Wanna Nibble on You

EMMMA AND I returned to the Arrone Plains to complete our monster-eradication request. This time, it was large hares, a rabbit-type enemy. They didn't normally appear on plains, but sometimes they wandered into the area. That's when they became a problem. You see, when large hares found a nice area, they inevitably brought more of their kind and the population exploded. They were stronger than goblins and had a bottomless appetite for grass, so they were all kinds of trouble for the local wildlife. That's why the kingdom commissioned requests like this one.

"I wonder where those hares are?"

"Why don't we try over there?"

The plains were pretty big, and we didn't know exactly where to find the hares. For a time, Emma and I just wandered about. Before we came across our quarry, we encountered two goblins.

"Garr!"

They charged right at us.

"Here they come." I took a defensive stance.

"I'll take the right one!" Emma shouted.

Which left me the one on the left. It was Level 10...and a male. Goblins had two sexes, just like humans. You could immediately identify the males from the additional "appendage" between their legs. We still had the large hares to fight, so I decided to be more conservative in my approach.

I fired a Stone Bullet, one foot in diameter, right at the goblin's crotch.

Direct hit! The creature shrieked and doubled over in pain. I dashed to close the distance and swung my sword to slice him clean in half.

Fwip!

Sure would've been cool if I'd managed it, but the creature's skull was harder than I'd expected. My blade got stuck partway through its head. Great. At least it was dead. I'd be in real trouble if the other one came at me now, though.

"Gah!"

The other goblin screamed and flew past as Emma nailed it with Wind Strike. Once she'd knocked her enemy over, she stabbed it through the neck with her dagger. She didn't even hesitate. But that wasn't really surprising—she had way more combat experience than me. Meanwhile, I'd only reached my present level by defeating easy enemies like those golden slimes. Regardless, Emma had an incredible command of her daggers and skills.

"Wow, you beat yours faster than me..." she said, standing straight.

"Ha ha, I'm not so sure about that. Look at the pickle I've gotten myself into."

It took a while to dislodge my sword from the goblin's skull. When Emma wrapped her hands around the grip to help, a gentle breeze wafted a wonderful fragrance into my nose.

"Huh. Your hair smells nice."

"What?! Wh-where's this coming from all of a sudden?"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean anything weird by it. The soap you use must be high quality."

"Umm, I guess? Do you not use soap?"

"Well, we don't have any soap at home. If we did, it wouldn't be long before my father sold it off."

"Your dad..."

Alice and my mother got on his case about that the other day. He ended up getting on his hands and knees and apologizing, but enough about my family. Sniffing someone else's hair did have a bit of a perverse overtone to it, but I had a secret weapon—I just had to say it was cool because we were best friends and Emma would accept it.

"Are you serious?" she asked.

“Of course I am. Anyway, I kind of need this.”

“Well, I don’t mind, really... But I want you to explain why. You’ve been hiding something, haven’t you?”

I probably should’ve known better than to try and keep a secret from Emma. We’d been friends for the better part of our lives, and she could see right through me. Once I refreshed my LP from sniffing her hair, I spilled my guts about everything—the hidden dungeon, my special abilities, and the LP-recovery thing, all of it. Of course, I also made her promise not to tell anyone.

“Okay, then take me to this hidden dungeon too!”

“Sorry, that’s the one thing my master told me I couldn’t do.”

Olivia really did tell me that. And anyway, I didn’t really want to take Emma there. Golden slimes aside, I didn’t want her to have to face dead reapers and the like.

“That’s not fair,” Emma pouted. “Why are you the only one who can get stronger?”

“Well, I’m thinking of a way to get around that.”

“Hmph. Then you better let me defeat those large hares by myself! Don’t you lift a finger!”

Emma ran on ahead without me. She had a bit of a childish streak, but it was part of her charm. I decided I would honor her wishes. I would only back her up if she looked like she was in trouble.

Before long, we came upon our targets.

“Oh, look.”

Up ahead, a large hare was munching on grass in a large clearing without a care in the world. Its ravenous appetite had rendered the surrounding area almost completely barren. And it was really, truly huge.

Visually, these hares resembled normal rabbits with horns, but in every other respect they bore no resemblance to cute little bunnies. This one stood almost six-feet tall and was incredibly muscular. While they were herbivores, these creatures were highly efficient at extracting nutrients from grass and, despite

being distant cousins to common rabbits, they were extremely aggressive—if they caught sight of a human, they’d attack. This encounter was no different. The second it spied us, the massive creature charged, impressively light on its feet.

“I don’t think so!” Emma was all fired up and opened with a Wind Strike.

It hit, but the hare was barely affected and swiftly retreated for another pass.

“How about another!”

Emma fired again, but this one didn’t work—the hare dodged right out of the way. At this point, Emma charged, both daggers in a backhanded grip. She covered the creature’s white body in streaks of red with a series of short slashes. The hare counter-attacked, shaking its three horns at her, but Emma was too fast—it didn’t even graze. I should mention that the hare was only Level 14. Not exactly a formidable enemy.

Over and over, the hare kept striking air. At some point it realized that its approach wasn’t working and shifted strategies. This time it took a flying leap.

“Mmph.”

Emma put up her guard. The hare was aiming right for her head. Taking a hit from that kind of weight could’ve killed her, so she dashed to avoid it. The earth shook when the creature hit the ground. Without missing a beat, it jumped again, but Emma continued to dodge. This repeated for a while, until suddenly, Emma was cornered.

“Eep?!”

Oh no!

Just as she was about to be crushed, I used all my energy to fire a three-foot diameter Stone Bullet up into the air. It knocked the hare’s massive body off course mid-fall, so it crashed to the ground and missed her by inches.

“Finish it.”

“G-got it.”

Emma threw herself at the creature and landed a critical hit while it struggled to its feet. Apparently even a monstrous hare couldn’t withstand a solid dose of

rock to the family jewels.

In the end, Emma was out of breath, but she went up a level. I put a hand on her shoulder to congratulate her.

“Noir...thank you...for saving me...” She was pretty bummed out not to have defeated the hare alone.

“Things got kinda dicey there at the end, but you did great otherwise.”

“I think the wounds I inflicted were just too shallow,” she said dolefully. “That thing had surprisingly tough skin.”

That was one of the downsides of daggers. You could get more strikes in, but they were fundamentally weak. They weren’t really the best choice against a large enemy.

“Cheer up, you’re Level 19 now.”

“Yeah...”

Wow, she really was down. I tried to think of what I could do. I actually had a lot of options. I considered giving her a skill—or maybe upgrading one of her existing ones?

I had just about settled on making her a Dual Wielded Daggers skill Grade B when I stopped myself. Using Get Creative to produce a skill automatically made it mine. I’d have to use Bestow to actually give it to her, and both of those things required LP. Rather than expending additional effort and wasting LP, maybe editing the skill was a better option. She’d already mastered C-Grade Dual Wielded Daggers, after all. I took a peep at the description for the skill.

Dual Wielded Daggers (Grade C): Improves holder’s handling of dual wielded daggers.

I had to think about how to best adjust it. As a test, I tried adding “significantly” in front of “improves.”

Adding “significantly” for 500 LP

Dual Wielded Daggers (Grade C) → Dual Wielded Daggers (Grade B)

Hooray! It was cheaper than producing the B-grade skill from whole cloth, but 500 was still a pretty big hit. Still. Worth it.

I told Emma, “I can make you stronger with my abilities, but I’m a little short on LP.”

She frowned. “What can we do about that?”

“Well, I do have one idea.”

“I’ll do anything you need! Assuming I can do it, of course!”

“No take-backsies?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

I took that as my cue to slip around behind Emma. She seemed a little tense, wondering what I was going to do. Then I announced my intentions. “Mind if I bite your ear?”

“E-excuse me?”

“Oh, I mean, not literally bite it off or anything, just like a little nibble.”

“Uh, um, is that really going to increase your LP?!”

“I have some other ideas, but this is probably the least risky.”

Emma looked a bit confused, but it didn’t take her long to summon the resolve. “Bring it on!”

“Here I go.” I gently wrapped my lips around her ear without letting my teeth touch her.

“Eeep!” Emma’s shoulders abruptly dropped, but she caught herself. Her earlobes were surprisingly soft and nice to the touch. The cartilage was firm and springy. Not half bad.

“Oooh! N-Noir, are you done yet?” Emma seemed to have a bit of a weakness for having her ears teased. Her knees began to tremble. It didn’t look like she’d

be able to tolerate much more.

I silently prayed for as much LP as possible. When I checked my stats, I'd jumped from 700 to 1,300. "Perfect! It worked."

I immediately used Editor to boost Emma's Dual Wielded Dagger skill to Grade B. It cost me 500 LP, leaving me with 800. I wanted to tell her the good news, but when I asked, "Feel anything yet?" I didn't get a response.

Emma's knees were still trembling like a newborn calf's.

Were her ears really that sensitive? In all the time we've spent together, how did I not know about that? Friendship sure is complicated.

Chapter 12:

Meat Makes a Body Strong

WHEN EMMA'S KNEES stopped shaking, we set about harvesting the large hare's horns as proof that we had completed the job.

"Hey, Noir, I hear this monster's meat is really tasty."

"Really? I'd like to give it a try, but I'm not sure we'll be able to get it home."

"Ah, yeah, probably not."

"Actually, hang on."

There were plenty of storage-related skills in the world. I distinctly remembered reading about one called Pocket Dimension, so I looked into it with Get Creative. It turned out it came in grades C through S, and each cost a different amount of LP:

Pocket Dimension (C-Grade) — 400 LP

Pocket Dimension (B-Grade) — 1,000 LP

Pocket Dimension (A-Grade) — 1,500 LP

Pocket Dimension (S-Grade) — 3,000 LP

When I checked the descriptions, apparently even the C-Grade iteration could store a small room's worth of items, which would then deteriorate more slowly than normal. The higher the grade, the more storage space and more effective the dimension's preservation effects. The S-Grade variant was crazy—the space was absolutely massive and anything inside was preserved perfectly. For now, I decided I could happily settle for C-Grade.

"Emma, I have a favor to ask. Would you give me one of our special friendship 'greetings' today?"

"Sure."

She bounced over to give me a hug and kiss me. I didn't get a huge amount of LP from it, but the effect seemed to reset every twenty-four hours, so it made

sense to do it once daily. With the additional LP in hand, I set about making a Pocket Dimension for myself. Then I touched the large hare's corpse. In a flash, the hare's massive body vanished.

"Wow!"

"I made the skill Pocket Dimension. Now we can bring it home to butcher and eat it. I want you to be able to eat as much of your favorite meat as you like, Emma."

"You're the best, Noir!" Emma cheerfully wrapped her arms around mine. She was so happy she even rubbed her cheek against my shoulder.

We were about to head out of the plains, but there was one problem I couldn't overlook—somehow there was another large hare, right between us and the way home.

"I guess it must've brought a friend," I said.

"Let me redeem myself on this one," Emma declared.

"Just be careful."

Emma was a quick learner, and she wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. She probably wanted to test out her newly improved skill too.

The fight this time was entirely one-sided. The general flow of events wasn't all that different from the previous battle—Emma dodged the hare's horns and slashed it to pieces at every opportunity. Her hits still didn't do much damage to the prior creature's flesh, but things were different this time around. Each slice made a devastating cut, and the monster's movements grew more and more sluggish. Emma delivered the final blow with ease, securing her victory.

"I guess that skill really helped," she said, barely out of breath. "It was super easy this time."

"Yeah, I really think you got better."

"Well, I have you to thank for that."

"I can keep giving you skills and making you stronger, but in exchange..."

"O-oh, I-I mean, I know. You want, like, kisses and stuff, right?"

“Yeah, kisses and *stuff*,” I teased. “The more risqué the act, the more LP I earn.”

Emma mumbled something about not touching her ears again while I chuckled and stored the second large hare away in my Pocket Dimension.

Once we returned to the guild hall, Lola greeted us with a big smile. “I’ve been awaiting your return. How’d it go?”

“Here’s our proof. We found a second one and took that out while we were at it.”

Well, less “we” and more Emma.

“So it had already brought others to the area?” asked Lola. “I’ll be sure to inform the guild master, there may be an additional reward.”

After the formalities were settled, I told Lola about the meat we’d harvested from the large hare.

She nodded. “We have a butcher under contract here, so we could have it prepared for you. You might even get the work for free in exchange for part of the creature.”

“All right, if you could get that taken care of?” I asked.

“Where is it?” Lola asked with a puzzled look on her face.

I decided it’d be faster to show her rather than explain, so I opened the pocket dimension. An extremely dead large hare appeared on the floor.

“Whaaaa?! A Pocket Dimension?”

“Something like that. You can handle it, right?”

“Uh, of course.”

Lola wasn’t the only one who was surprised. I’d attracted the attention of all the adventurers in the hall.

“You have a Pocket Dimension? You oughta join my party!”

“Wow, I’m impressed a coupla newbies took out a large hare!”

The guild was suddenly brimming with excitement—large hare meat had to

be especially tasty. Though, they also probably wanted to butter up us newcomers.

“Actually, we have two of them,” I said. “Would you all like to share the meat with us?”

“Are you sure?!” they all shouted.

“Of course. You’ll each just have to owe us a favor in the future.”

“Yeaaaaaaah! Start preparing for a feast, everyone! Lola, babe, call the butcher!”

Just like that, my fellow guild members swept the large hares out into the yard and started preparing for a barbecue. People even brought out condiments. Soon, the butcher arrived and took the beast apart. It wasn’t long before the meat, seasoned with just the right amount of salt, was sizzling on a heated grill.

“You should take the first bite, boss,” said one of my colleagues.

“Oh, stop,” I said. “But, well, I’m not going to say no to that.”

I took a big bite of the offered piece. My eyes went wide. It was absolutely delicious! It vaguely resembled chicken, though a little lighter in color and with more chew. It tasted weirdly refined and delicate, and could easily be addictive. Everyone laughed heartily as I smacked my lips and dug back in.

“H-hey, that piece is mine!”

Emma tucked in with some of the other adventurers. It was a full-on barbecue battle, starring the one and only Emma Brightness.

After about thirty pieces, my belly was so round I almost looked pregnant. But the food was delicious and it would definitely net me some sweet LP, so I was in an excellent mood. The only thing I could possibly have wanted in that moment was dessert. Just as the idea crossed my mind, another adventurer approached.

“Hey, wanna taste of this?”

“Wait, those aren’t what I think they are, right?”

“Oh, but they are. They’re the hare’s eyeballs.”

Two inky black balls that looked almost like candy plopped down onto my plate. When I recoiled, he smirked and tossed one into his own mouth. “Mmmm! I can’t get enough!”

I couldn’t believe it. How could *those* possibly taste good? Dubious as I was, I didn’t think the adventurer was putting on a show or trying to prank me.

“I thought I’d let you have it,” he said, “since you’re the reason we even have this meat. But if you’re not gonna eat it, I’ll definitely take it.”

“I’m...gonna eat it.”

“Hell yeah!”

Thinking hard about what my master had told me of how delicious-but-unusual food earned more LP, I steeled myself and popped the inky eyeball into my mouth.

My teeth sank into it with ease. It had been gently cooked, long and slow. It was still warm, and much softer than I expected. Juice gushed out and filled my mouth. “O-ooh! It’s like, sweet *and* savory?!”

The adventurer grinned. “Good, right?”

“Yeah, it’s way better than I could have possibly imagined!”

“There’s a lot of stuff that looks gross, but is actually great, if you give it a shot. Makes the girls scream, though.”

“Thanks for telling me about it.”

“Happy to help.”

I felt like a whole new world had opened up to me. The swell of LP I got seemed to confirm it. While I’d earned favors for a gift of meat, I really owed the adventurers of Odin a debt of gratitude.

Current LP: 2,200

The next day, I took a break from adventuring and went straight to the hidden dungeon. I hunted several golden slimes on the first floor to level up, then

headed down to visit my master.

The second I stepped into the room, my master's *extremely* excited voice boomed in my head.

<Hey! The hell you think you're doin', Noir?!>

"Why are you yelling at me all of a sudden? And what's with the weird accent?"

<It's what you deserve for leaving me all alone here!> "All right already, I apologize. I was busy joining Odin and becoming an adventurer."

<Oh, did you know that was my guild back in the day? Ah, that really takes me back.> "Apparently you left quite an impression."

<Oh, I just did my part, nothing special.>

I had my doubts about that. Indeed, when I asked exactly what she did for them, I got a lengthy story about how she rebuilt the guild from the ground up after it was nearly destroyed, and how she saved the town from monsters, and even punished despots. I was starting to think my master would make a good queen.

<By the way, feel like doing some more dungeon exploration today?> "Yeah, I think so. What I'd really like is to get stronger and find some treasure."

If I could do it without trying too hard, of course.

<What have you got next? The fourth floor? Why don't you try making the skill Dungeon Elevator? Once you set foot on a level, you'll be able to access it immediately. It only works in the hidden dungeon, though.> "There's already a skill like that? Why don't I make one that lets me go to any floor, even ones I haven't been to yet?"

<Sure, you could, but it costs so much LP it's practically impossible.> I guess I should've expected that. It'd be too easy to jump to the last level otherwise. But that other skill she mentioned did sound useful.

Dungeon Elevator — 600 LP

The price seemed reasonable, so I decided to go for it. “This way if I get to the fourth floor today, it’ll be a piece of cake to get back there next time.”

<There are only dead reapers on the third floor. Easy peasy.> “Maybe for you, but that fight last time cost me 200 LP!” Of course, with that feast yesterday, I had more than enough LP to manage, but still.

<Aw, did you have a hard time with it? You should just make Holy Flame, you can one-shot ‘em with that.> “Holy Flame?”

<It’s a pretty useful fire spell for how little LP it costs. It’s fire with a holy elemental modifier, and dead reapers are weak to that. Also, if you happen to run into especially high-level ones, you can just Bestow it with some skill that’s even weaker against holy and roast ‘em with Holy Flame.> She really knew what she was talking about. I figured Holy Flame should be more than enough.

Holy Flame — 800 LP

I had 800 left after I’d acquired the skill.

<Good luck!>

I stood in front of her and used Dungeon Elevator, focusing on my desire to go to the third floor. I was shocked when a hole opened up in front of me. I was always a bit of a chicken, so I was hesitant to jump right in. I mean, what if it was really deep? What if I got hurt?

<Ah ha ha ha, I knew you’d be a big scaredy cat. Relax, just jump.> “I’m trusting you on this one.”

I steeled myself, made a small jump, and fell through the hole. For an instant, the world seemed to spin and whirl around me. Then I felt my feet touch the floor. I was glad for the soft landing, not to mention the fact that I happened to touch down right next to a set of stairs. It worked! The spell had already proved its worth.

Chapter 13:

That Which Lurks on the Fourth Floor...

THE DUNGEON ELEVATOR sure was handy, but it had its limitations. Apparently, you had to wait a full hour between uses. I had to make sure I didn't forget that.

At any rate, I stepped out onto the third floor and almost immediately encountered a dead reaper—all white bones peeking out of its tattered rags and an ungodly huge scythe that looked like it belonged in a legend. It was predictably around Level 100 and had the Execution Slash skill.

The creature wafted toward me. It moved slowly, so I grit my teeth and watched, and waited. Sweat beaded on my forehead and nape. Closer. Closer. There.

When the reaper was within five yards, I held out my hand and cast Holy Flame. A spray of white fire roared out of my hand. The plume was wide enough to fully engulf the monster. It was almost beautiful, and something about the holy element made it feel like a sacred act.

“Auuughh...”

The reaper moaned as it thrashed, the white flames ravaging its mass of rags and bones. For a while it was hard to tell what was going on, but before long the monster was reduced to an ashen corpse.

I let out a breath, relieved, and not a little pleased. “Huh. I guess I'll take the scythe. Seems pretty high quality.”

Unfortunately, my Discerning Eye wasn't quite able to evaluate weapons yet.

Discerning Eye for Items — 300 LP

It was cheap to make, just like Discerning Eye, so I went for it.

Great Scythe: B-Grade. No attached skills.

Too bad. It would've been nice if the scythe came with any skills, but it was by no means a terrible item. I also learned at that point that items had grades just like some skills did.

With the dead reaper disposed of, I located the stairs to the fourth floor. After that encounter, I'd also handily passed Level 40. I also didn't notice much of a change in my overall energy levels or physical condition, so Holy Flame probably didn't use that much magic.

By then, I'd leveled up quite a bit and I probably could've gone back up, but I decided to touch my feet to the fourth floor so that if nothing else, I could use Dungeon Elevator to go right back. Plus, it couldn't hurt to look around a little, right?

Unlike the previous three levels, the fourth level wasn't a maze. Instead, it looked like one long hallway. Strangely, there were no monsters in sight, either. I started inching straight ahead, keeping my guard up, when suddenly the hall opened up into a room with no doors. The hall seemed to continue on the far side, but that wasn't what had my attention.

"Whaaa? Where did all these people come from?"

There were at least a hundred of them, chatting and milling about. The sheer number of people actually made the spacious room feel rather cramped. From the looks of it, the crowd consisted mainly of adventurers, since most of them were clad in armor and robes. Except, no one but me was supposed to be able to get in here, so how was there anyone, let alone so many? And why were they so relaxed about being on the fourth floor of a dungeon filled with bizarre, high-level monsters?

As my thoughts whirled and I began to panic, one of them shouted and pointed, directly at me: "A human! A living human is here!"

"Wow! When did he get here?!"

They all turned toward me. In an instant, I was surrounded. It happened so fast I couldn't react. If they meant me harm, I wouldn't have been able to do

anything. But I was beginning to understand that the glimmer of light in their eyes was friendly—these people meant to welcome me. It was at this point that I finally realized something kind of important. Their bodies were all completely and utterly translucent.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” said one of them. “A human, in the flesh!”

“Uh, um, of course I am...aren’t you?”

Tentatively, I tried to use Discerning Eye, but it gave me absolutely nothing. No names, no levels, nothing. That’s what sealed it for me: these people were dead. I’d tested the skill on the body of a dead animal I’d found in town and received similar results.

“Oh, don’t freak out,” one of them said. “We’re ghosts, you see.”

“O-of course you are,” I said. “And...there sure are a lot of you.”

“Our souls retain our forms from when we were alive. Normally, when people die, their souls move on. Or at least, we think that’s how it works. But apparently if you die in this dungeon, your soul ends up here.”

And I guessed that meant *here*-here, like couldn’t-leave-this-room here.

“Sorry if this sounds rude, but how did you guys get in here?” I asked. “I’m surprised anyone figured out the password.”

“Password?” They all gave me a puzzled look.

It seemed none of them got in the way I had. That was a little weird, considering it was how both me and my master had gotten inside.

“Okay, so, another possibly rude-sounding question, but how long ago were you alive?”

“Sorry, we don’t really have a sense of time. But I believe it was the holy year of 12XX.”

“Th-three hundred years ago?!”

My master had gotten herself trapped on the second floor two hundred years ago, so these ghosts got in some hundred years before that. They told me that this place was a hidden dungeon back then too, but a few people still knew

about it and would come and go as they pleased.

Basically, that meant this place had been sealed by someone between two and three hundred years ago. But by who? And why? Maybe because so many people died in here? Or was there some other even more serious reason behind it? I was at a complete loss, but I'd have to leave my questions for the time being. The ghosts had a request.

"You said your name was Noir, right? We actually have a favor to ask you."

"I mean, I'll hear you out," I said. "But I can't promise anything."

"We want you to bring us a priest who can Exorcise our souls so they can move on to the next world."

There was a certain subset of undead monsters that, when killed, infected corpses and turned them into zombies. To prevent this from happening, those souls needed to be Exorcised and sent on to the afterlife. It was a skill typically mastered by priests and clerics.

"We just can't take it anymore. Our bodies may not experience pain, but we don't feel alive either!"

Well, you literally aren't alive. The comment didn't seem exactly appropriate, so I kept it to myself.

Worse, I wasn't sure what to do. I really didn't want to tell anyone else about the dungeon—and anyway, my master had told me not to. It'd be different if I knew someone I could trust, but a total stranger was too risky. Who knew what could happen? I might not even be able to come back if more people found out about this place. But all the same, I couldn't just leave the suffering souls.

"Please, we're begging you!"

"Sir Noir, please! Sir Noir!"

They got down on their knees and begged. You'd need an incredibly thick skin, cold mind, and black heart to disregard something as pitiful as that. I was running out of ideas, so I tried making the skill.

Huh. It was a lot cheaper than I thought. *Well, that was easy.*

“All right. Okay. *I’ll Exorcise you.*”

“You can do that?! That’s impressive, you look like a total flake!”

“You know,” I said, “I just remembered, I actually have something I need to take care of—”

“Wait! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! You’re so dashing, Sir Noir! You’re so cool and dependable and awesome, Sir Noir!” The ghosts frantically tried to convince me to stay. Funny, considering they’d just been insulting me.

“I’m not really sure how I feel about you kissing my ass...”

“You’re, like, so totally incredible, Sir Noir! You’re the bravest and most handsome man I’ve ever met. Isn’t that right, girls?”

“Where do I even start? Sir Noir has such piercing eyes and firm lips and his boundless kindness conceals his brave and manly figure. He is, without a doubt, the most beautiful boy in the whole world.”

“Am I really *that* desirable?”

“Of course you are! If I still had a body, I’d ask you to take me right here, right now! I’d want you to have your way with me!”

“But am I handsome?”

“You are super-duper hot!”

“All right, all right, stand in a single-file line, I’ll Exorcise you.”

A joyous shout rippled through the crowd. I usually thought of ghosts as something scary, but these guys couldn’t be further from frightening.

Turned out, the Exorcism skill was simple enough to use. All you had to do was touch the target and focus. The one major complication was that they didn’t have physical bodies, so I had to directly touch their souls—as much as I could ‘touch’ something like that.

“Ahhh, now I can finally cross over to the other side. Thank you.” The first spirit’s already faint body faded out and then disappeared entirely. They looked

happy right before they were Exorcised. It must've been boring being stuck in this place for so long.

"Where did you die anyway?"

I asked the same question of each of them.

"This is kind of embarrassing, but a golden slime got me with its venom on the first level..."

"A trap in a room on the second level."

"A monster on the third level. Its scythe just grazed my finger, but I died. From that?!"

Most of them had died before the fourth level, but not all of them.

"I was eaten by a giant crocodile on the fifth floor."

"My entire party was swallowed by a giant snake on the fifth floor and we were dissolved by its stomach acid."

It sounded like level five was pretty darn dangerous. I was lucky to have gotten that information. I asked the same question of the last soul, a man in expensive-looking armor. He had died on the third floor too, but he gave me some exceedingly useful information.

"As a token of my appreciation, I would like to bequeath a powerful weapon unto you, Lord Noir. Three hundred years may have passed, but you may yet be able to dig it up."

"It's buried?"

"Indeed. Do you know the clocktower on Main Street?"

"It's still there, yeah."

"Dig a hole beneath the largest tree in the park to the east. There my weapon is buried."

A troubling thought occurred. I made sure to ask him why he buried it, if it was such a powerful weapon.

"It is most powerful, however...I was plagued by ill omens once I came to possess it, so I sealed it away. But you, Lord Noir, may be able to make use of it.

If you cannot, sell it or destroy it, whatever you please.”

“Got it. I guess I’ll have to take you up on that.”

Once I Exorcised the final ghost, I headed down the hall on the far end of the room. There, I found another set of stairs. I hesitated for a while, but then I made my way down. Carefully. I mean, what if there was one of those giant monsters lurking just at the end of the stairs?

But my fears proved to be for naught. There was nothing in the passage, so I hurriedly used Dungeon Elevator to return to the second floor. Then, I dutifully described everything that had transpired to my master and once more left the dungeon.

Chapter 14:

Even Receptionists Need to Make a Living

“DON'T YOU THINK our family is a little cold?”

I broached the subject over the breakfast table the morning after I'd exorcised the spirits. My father, my mother, and my little sister Alice all dropped their bread and looked completely baffled.

“Of course not,” said Alice. “Familial bonds are important, expressing that is a good thing.”

“I've said it many times before,” said my mother. “But I love both you and your sister from the bottom of my heart.”

“Aren't you forgetting somebody?” my father said, pointing at himself.

My mother didn't say a word and simply flashed him a tepid smile. I thought she'd made the right call. One wrong word and there was no telling what nonsense father might get up to.

“Yes, mother, but there are some things you can't express in words. Things you have to show with your actions.”

“Goodness, brother dearest, you aren't suggesting crossing the bounds of decency and engaging in forbidden love, are you?!” Alice asked.

“Eh? Not in the slightest.” All I was suggesting was probably the least indecent thing imaginable: a hug. “I think we should hug every morning. Come on, stand up.”

I opened my arms wide and gave my mother a big hug. Then I did the same to Alice, whose cheeks were bright red for some reason. My plan worked; I generated more LP. Satisfied, I sat back down.

“Well, uh, family definitely is important,” my father said with a bashful look. “And so is body language. I agree.”

“Why are you blushing?”

“I-It’s just a little embarrassing to hear my son say that to me.”

“I’m not giving you a hug, father.”

“What?! But why?!”

“I mean, that’d be weird, wouldn’t it?”

“This is discrimination! I’m your family too, you know!” He clung tearfully to my mother, but it didn’t take long for his expression to mellow as he buried his face in her ample bosom.

“Father, must I remind you that certain activities are only appropriate in the bedroom?”

“Hmph, I’m not listening to anything my cold-hearted son has to say. Oh no, now *I’m* discriminating!” He looked aggrieved, but I wasn’t concerned. His mood would surely improve by this evening.

I finished my breakfast and headed to the park by the clocktower. The final ghost in the fancy armor had mentioned his weapon was buried at the foot of the largest tree. Thankfully, there weren’t a lot of people around, so I started digging without having to explain what the heck I was up to. After about an hour, I was drenched with sweat and realized that I was going about things extremely inefficiently.

“At this rate, the day’ll be over before I get this done.”

The ghost had said it was beneath the big tree, but that still covered a pretty significant area. My only real option was to make a new skill.

Excavate — 100 LP

It wasn’t terribly expensive, and I might even have a use for it in the future. I quickly made myself the skill and the digging got way easier—I absolutely tore through the earth around the base of the tree. Nothing about the ground or my shovel had changed, but it took about a fifth of the effort. I kept working for

another hour, thankful for the usefulness of the skill.

Suddenly, I hit something hard. I moved faster and...there it was! A solemn iron box, buried in the ground. I pulled it out and brushed it off. It was about three hundred years old, so the box itself wasn't in the greatest shape, but its contents were probably fine. It was fastened from the outside with a simple mechanism, which I unlocked before I lifted the heavy lid.

“Wow...”

A single sword lay within. Its black scabbard was decorated with gold. The contrast was strikingly beautiful. The sword's handle was also gold and looked fit for a king. It didn't take much more than a glance to tell it was a truly high-quality item.

I timidly reached out to touch it, but stopped my hand just before I made contact and decided to use my Discerning Eye.

Two-edged Blade: B-Grade. Skills: Sharp Edge; Bad Luck

If a weapon had a name, that would have been displayed too. It was pretty darn impressive, overall—a B-Grade sword with skills attached. Sharp Edge significantly improved a blade's cutting ability and made it more durable against breaking and dulling. The problem, as you might expect, was Bad Luck.

Bad Luck: Increases the probability of bad luck befalling the owner.

It had been no coincidence that bad things started happening to that ghost once he obtained the sword. Curse skills were the price you paid for great power. Normally, you'd take a blade like this to someone who could lift the curse or sell it off to an arms dealer. But, lucky little me, I had the Editor skill.

Replace “bad” with “good” — 200 LP

“Bad Luck” will become “Good Luck”

Perfect! I approved the change and the item description changed along with it.

Two-edged Blade: A-Grade. Skills: Sharp Edge; Good Luck

Sweet. Now it was an incredible weapon! It may have just been a two-edged blade, but it made good things happen too. That must have been why it went up a whole rank. I could probably make other skills to Bestow upon the sword too, but because my LP was getting low, I decided to pay Emma a visit first.

“Congratulations! You’ve been promoted to D-Rank!” Lola rang her bell vigorously.

“Hey, we knew you had potential, kid. Thanks again for that meat the other day too!”

Everyone in the guild hall applauded and I bashfully scratched my head. I’d finished my requests for the day and finally earned enough points to rank up. It took me a little longer than I’d anticipated, but I was still moving up the ranks pretty fast. The timing was pretty perfect, too—I was starting school tomorrow.

I’d just completed a task collecting ten goblin wrists. Since Emma was busy with family affairs, I made short work of this one on my own.

“Now that you’ve been promoted to D-Rank, allow me to introduce you to some new guild systems. Please take a look at this first.” Lola pointed to the graph on the wall. It was the one I’d noticed on the first day, that had bar graphs as well as Lola’s and the other receptionists’ names on it. “Once our adventurers make it to D-Rank, they can choose a receptionist as their manager. We sometimes call this our ‘Support System.’”

“Oh, I get it. So, the graph tracks the points of the adventurers you manage, right?”

“You always were a sharp one. They’re not exactly the same as the point-system scores, but that’s probably the best way to think of it.”

“Lemme guess, those scores have an effect on your salary?”

“Perhaps...”

Now it all made sense. This was why all the receptionists were so pretty. You didn’t really *need* to be managed by one, and most people wouldn’t bother unless they were otherwise interested or felt some obligation toward them. But the support system meant people wanted to make *their* receptionist number one in the guild.

Whoever came up with the idea had a killer head for business. Surely any adventurer who fell head over heels for a receptionist would work extra hard to help her win.

“So, what do we adventurers get out of it?”

“Normally, every month, each receptionist gives a present to the adventurer who contributed the most points. Usually they’re coupons for things like shoulder rubs or handshakes, or even granting you the honor of going shopping with me.”

“Selling your body, huh?”

“Watch your language! The competition is deadly serious, okay?”

“S-sorry about that.”

“I’m only telling you this because I hate it when people get the wrong idea: I’m a *virgin*.” She said the potentially scandalous word in almost a whisper, but I heard each pronounced syllable.

“I don’t really get why you needed to...ohhh, never mind, I get it.”

Some of the receptionists probably leaned a little more heavily on their sex appeal for monthly rewards, but Lola was trying to fight clean.

“If you have a long streak of bad scores, then you get the axe, so everyone’s doing what they can. There are plenty of receptionists who focus on trying to seduce unattached and highly competent adventurers.”

That made sense, I guess. They probably used the old “I could be free tonight...as long as you pick me”-type strategy.

“Just look at Sarah, she has the highest score on the chart.”

“Wow, you really can’t miss her, huh?”

“It’s not just her large chest that makes her stand out. Every month she gives out a coupon to cop a feel.”

“Well, I think I’ll go with Sarah then!”

“You’re absolute scum! It seems I’ve misjudged you Mr. Noir. You’re nothing but a lech!”

I was a little confused. I had meant it as a joke, but Lola was clearly upset. She started defending herself, and I wasn’t a monster, so of course I assured her I was just kidding and that I’d always intended to pick her. When her tears vanished and were replaced by an ear-to-ear grin, I realized she’d played me like a fiddle.

“I look forward to working with you from here on! You know, Mr. Noir...I think I might be able to offer a super *special* coupon...just for you,” she said, looking up at me coquettishly, her long eyelashes fluttering.

I had to wonder where on earth she’d learned how to do that. She couldn’t have been born with it. Right?

At any rate, both the adventurers and receptionists were working their butts off to make a living. You needed money to survive, after all. That kind of work wasn’t easy. I was all too acquainted with it myself.

Chapter 15:

The First Day of School

I OPENED MY WINDOWS and the warm morning breeze flooded my room. It ruffled my hair and the hem of Alice's skirt.

"The big day is finally here, brother dearest."

"Yeah, I'm finally going to get to start school."

I had already put on my new uniform, but I never could do the tie up very well. This was my secret—getting my little sister to help.

"I'm sure you'll do well in Hero Academy, brother. I'm determined to pass that exam next year too."

"I appreciate it, but don't force yourself, okay? I'd really rather you didn't die."

"I just want to get a little closer to the brother I admire! By the way...you still haven't given me my hug today," she said cheerily, her arms wide. She had her eyes closed and her chin slightly raised, lips in a pout.

"Alice? You do know what a hug is, don't you? You should do what you're suggesting with your boyfriend."

"Brother, boyfriend, same difference."

"All right, that settles it, next time I'm out, I'm picking up a dictionary."

See, this was one of the downsides of being poor. We didn't even own a dictionary. And before you ask, no, I didn't kiss her. We just hugged, very platonically...for ten seconds...twenty seconds...sixty seconds. It was going to become a problem if she wouldn't let go.

"I feel like I might never see you again if I let you go now..."

"I'm just going to school."

At the worst possible moment, my father opened the door to my room. "Hey, Mr. Elite Academy Student, it's time to...get..."

It was just a hug, but things were looking a little too passionate. My father

froze in the doorway, backed out of the room, then spun around and ran down the stairs at full speed. “Oh dear!” he cried. “What is a father to do?! My children are engaging in forbidden love!”

It was a real pain how he always jumped to conclusions like that. I shook my head and we went down to the living room.

“Good morning, mother.”

“Good morning, children.”

“How can you bear to face your children?” father asked. “After I told you I saw them in a scandalous embrace in his room!”

“Well, I mean...”

“Father, you’ve got the wrong idea. There isn’t anything unnatural about my relationship with Alice,” I announced.

But that only upset him more. “But you’re holding hands!” he shouted, pointing.

“That’s because Alice begged me to.”

“You know who holds hands? People in romantic relationships! Look! You even have your fingers intertwined!”

“Father, it is completely normal behavior to hold hands with your family members or people you respect.”

“Is it? Am I that old now?”

Alice nodded deeply. After that, my father calmed down and started to rethink his behavior. That sort of flexibility was one thing I couldn’t fault him for. He ran over to Alice, demanding that she hold his hand too, but got depressed when she bluntly rejected him.

As an aside, holding hands earned me some LP. Not a whole lot, but not so little that it wasn’t worth it.

“By the way, what’s that?” I asked, pointing at a pot I’d noticed sitting on a shelf.

The pot itself was unremarkable, but its contents, a large quantity of pitch-

black insects, was unusual. They almost looked like grasshoppers?

“They were a gift from our neighbors. I was thinking we’d have them for dinner tonight,” said my mother. She was from a respectable family, but she’d abandoned all that to elope with my father, and she was a lot tougher than she looked. Eating bugs didn’t faze her.

The rest of us, on the other hand, weren’t about to touch them.

“I think there are too many for me to finish by myself, though,” my mother said, thoughtfully.

“Could you make me a plate too?” I asked.

Silence fell over the room; I had always turned her down in the past.

“Have you surpassed me, my son?” father whispered.

“I couldn’t eat those,” said Alice. “You really are incredible, brother dearest.”

My mother just smiled at them.

After breakfast, the three of them insisted on seeing me off, despite my protests. They even sang me the chorus of the Traveler’s Song, which attracted the attention of everyone passing by. It was orders of magnitude beyond embarrassing, but to be honest, it made me kind of happy.

I met up with Emma at the gates of the Hero Academy and paid my 300,000 rels at the desk. At that, the receptionist returned the remains of the dead reaper I’d killed during the exam. I wondered if I could sell it to help fatten the family coffers.

I tossed the reaper’s remains into my Pocket Dimension and we headed to the S-Class home room. Once classes started, we’d be able to ditch the badges indicating the status of our noble families, but the first day was an exception. Today, they were a requirement. Even the commoners, who didn’t have badges of their own, had to borrow ones from the front desk to identify themselves.

“I kind of hate this,” said Emma.

I understood how she felt. This mandatory badge business made it painfully

apparent that the whole “it doesn’t matter where you come from” thing was a total sham. Ultimately, we were expected to remember who had all the real power from our first meetings, today. On some level, I guess it was unavoidable. We lived in a society where everything revolved around social status. If anything, it’d be weirder to pretend it didn’t exist.

We opened the door to the classroom, and all the attention immediately fell on us. The room was only about half full, and most of the eyes in it were fixed on our badges: the symbols of a baron and baronet’s family.

S-Class was full of the kids of important nobles and the mega-wealthy, so we were way, way down at the low end of the class spectrum. Me in particular. Some of our classmates turned around as immediately as they’d turned to look, having judged us unworthy. Others faltered, unsure of whether they ought to acknowledge our existence. Well, more accurately, that’s what the girls did. The boys were still totally zeroed in on us—or, on Emma.

“Name’s Rappard,” one of them said. “I’m the eldest son of the Delmond family. Nice to meet ya.”

“Hello...” Emma bowed her head with a sigh, sounding dejected.

She had always attracted a lot of attention from the boys, ever since we were in prep school. She was cute and easy to talk to, so they were pretty relentless. One time, a couple of teachers even came to blows over her. That situation had been age-inappropriate in all kinds of directions.

At any rate, it wasn’t ultimately a surprise that Emma was facing this kind of reaction all over again. It also normally put me on the outs with everyone, seeing as I was actually Emma’s friend. Then, contrary to my expectations, one of the boys actually spoke to me, and even offered his hand.

“Hello there, I’m the Siphonious family’s—” Halfway through the sentence, he saw the badge pinned to my chest and stopped dead. Ha. Maybe his eyesight was bad so he couldn’t see it clearly before, or maybe he’d been too distracted by Emma to notice until he’d started talking. The otherwise anonymous member of the Siphonious family withdrew his hand from my vicinity. He reminded me of a turtle pulling its head back into its shell. “Man, it’s so nice and warm out today, huh?”

With that, the nameless boy walked away like nothing had happened. I thought it was pretty darn rude of him, but I held my tongue.

Baronets held a unique position among the nobility. It was a rank given to people who weren't nobles by lineage, but who did something to contribute to their kingdom. Apparently, that was how my father earned his title—he'd played a pivotal role in stopping a monster invasion. More to the point, most nobles didn't consider baronets real nobility. There was a demeaning tendency to insist that the ranks truly started with barons.

"Umm, don't you think that was a little rude?" Emma pushed her way through the crowd to confront the Siphonious boy. Her eyes seethed with rage.

"Hm? What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Noir's father might only be a baronet, but he took third place in the entrance exam."

"Yeah, but we all know what really happened there...right?" The Siphonious boy looked to the rest of the class for their approval. He didn't need to say it. Everyone knew what he meant—that I'd only passed by riding my team's coattails.

Emma, however, knew better. And because she was the person she was, she had to go and be completely earnest about it. "If Noir hadn't brought back that dead reaper, I might not have passed myself. He ranked that high because he worked for it!"

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Oh, stop lying! Everyone knows Lenore was the one who did that."

Suddenly, Emma remembered that was the cover story. But her blood was boiling. I could see the impulse to refute it growing in her eyes. Fortunately, just then the door opened, and the very topic of our conversation walked in with her entourage.

"—and I felt the dead reaper's sword graze my throat. I was a hair's breadth from losing my life, so I retreated and composed myself. I stared my enemy down as I told myself, 'Lenore, you can't die here.'"

Lenore was quite the storyteller. If only she'd gotten the weapon right. And the fact that even a scratch would've killed her. Regardless, this just hammered home the idea that I hadn't earned my spot.

"Sorry," said the nameless Siphonious kid. "I know my parents told me to make friends with the common people too." And just like that, I wasn't his concern anymore. "Come on, everyone, we should get to the auditorium. The entrance ceremony's about to start."

He sounded super sincere, let me tell you. Of course, when the duke's daughter Maria arrived on the scene, he panicked to make way for her. Everyone gulped. She was still perfect in every way. And the very first people she addressed...were me and Emma.

"Good morning, Mr. Noir, Miss Emma. I must thank you again for your kindness when last we met."

The phrase "when last we met" packed a particular punch with the stuck-up S-Class crowd. Admittedly, we hadn't exactly done much other than say hello, but I played along.

"Oh no, I should be thanking you," I said. "I look forward to sharing a long and happy school life with you, my lady."

"Indeed. I hope for the very same."

Once we finished exchanging greetings, the class swarmed her. I wasn't surprised that she was popular. But one boy pushed against the flow to stand in front of me. It was the very same boy who had withdrawn his hand earlier.

"I'm the Siphonious family's—"

"Not interested." I slapped his hand away and strode over to the door. You can't buy Stardia pride that cheaply.

Anyway, I had more important people to see.

"Oh, Lady Lenore, slayer of the dead reaper," I said. "We need to talk."

She jumped. "Eep!"

Oh come on, you don't need to freak out. Don't worry, this little lie works out better for the both of us.

I left the classroom with Lenore. She was white as a sheet.

Chapter 16:

Fancy Footwork

WE SLIPPED OUT of the classroom and down the hall, away from prying eyes, and then abruptly stopped. Lenore's shoulders shuddered, but she really didn't have anything to be afraid of.

"You can let your guard down," I said. "It's nothing bad."

"Y-you're not mad? I thought you were upset because I was bragging about, you know..."

Sure, I got a firsthand dose of her tall tales, but I was the one who told her to lie in the first place, so of course I wasn't mad. "No, no. I just had some constructive criticism for you. First off, dead reapers use scythes—take a look."

Lenore's eyes went wide when I used my Pocket Dimension to produce the scythe out of thin air. "Y-you have the Pocket Dimension skill?!"

"Let's keep that between us, thanks," I said, handing over the scythe. While she examined it intently, I retrieved more parts of the creature's corpse. "And here's the skull. Well, half of it."

"Wow, a real dead reaper..."

Once I'd hooked her attention, I got down to what I really wanted to talk about. "Your story would be a lot more convincing if you had these, wouldn't it? What would you say if I sold them to you on the cheap?"

When I told her I'd give it to her for a hundred thousand rels, she jumped for joy.

"Are you sure you're willing to part with it for a mere million? I can't pass that up!"

Whoa! I was a little surprised when she accidentally tacked on another digit, though I did consequently learn that earls' daughters regularly walk around with millions of rels on them. Obviously, I wasn't about to turn down *more* money.

With that settled, Lenore returned to the classroom to stash her purchase with a bounce in her step, and I headed off wearing my own great big smile. I decided I'd give half of this windfall directly to my family and put the other half away as savings.

By the time I got to the auditorium, everyone was already lined up.

"Over here, Noir." Emma beckoned from a spot way at the front.

"Thanks for saving me a spot."

"Force of habit. We've always sat together after all, ever since we were kids."

Emma stuck out her tongue and leaned toward me, so I stroked her head. She was really fond of that sort of thing. And how could I say no to the sensation of running my fingers through her soft, silky hair?

The president took the stage and began his speech. He went on about how highly the academy valued its students' independence and so forth. Apparently, alumni went on to be all sorts of things—adventurers, dungeon seekers, mercenaries, palace guards, monster hunters, or even royal knights. The academy was set up to allow its students to take whatever courses they needed to pursue their desired path.

After the president finished his speech, the principal came up to explain the schedule for the year. As he did, murmurs washed through the student body.

"Hey, look at his head."

"Yikes."

The principal was in his early fifties and had one extremely unnatural, attention-grabbing quality: his hair. Well, not exactly *his* hair, but it was on his head. You see, this was a common "treatment" that involved applying the mucus of a particular kind of caterpillar to one's scalp, and using it to attach small bundles of another person's hair. The mucus only remained sticky for about twenty-four hours, so it had to be reapplied every day.

The substance was sold at general stores and fetched a relatively high price. Sure, it was emotionally critical for some folks, but the result of this particular technique wasn't exactly what you'd call natural. If you didn't know what you

were doing, all the hair could end up pointing in weird directions, so it was usually easy to pick out at a glance.

“Um, so, for today...” The principal continued through the snickers.

Emma looked a little sad. “It’s so mean to laugh at him.”

“Yeah,” I said. Emma’s kindness inspired me to try Getting Creative.

Increased Hair Growth — 300 LP

It looked within my budget, so I decided to check how much it’d cost me to Bestow it on our hapless principal.

$$300 \text{ LP (Get Creative)} + 7,000 \text{ LP (Bestow)} = 7,300 \text{ LP}$$

That seemed a *little* high. Out of curiosity, I adjusted my target to Emma and the change was astounding. The cost to Bestow the skill on her was a mere 50 LP. I guess everyone has their own unique strengths and weaknesses. The principal’s scalp must be particularly hostile terrain for hair. The same sort of thing applied to combat-related skills and the like, so it was probably more effective to boost your friends’ existing strengths, rather than trying to force them to develop new ones.

Once the ceremony was over, we headed back to the classroom to meet our homeroom teacher. She turned out to be a woman in her early twenties wearing makeup that gave her a mysterious air. With her fit body and attractive facial features, no one would object to calling her a true beauty.

“My name is Elena. I worked as a mercenary from the age of seven until I was twenty-two. Due to various circumstances, I started working as an instructor here last year.” She looked a little exhausted as she ran her fingers through her bangs. “I already know who all of you are, so let’s get right to first period. Change into your combat gear and assemble in the yard.”

Ms. Elena promptly left the classroom and we all rushed to get changed. I made sure my newly acquired two-edged sword was securely fastened on my hip.

Five minutes later, the class was assembled out in the yard. Ms. Elena was waiting for us with a wooden sword resting on her shoulder.

“This world is full of monsters, thieves, and all manner of villains,” she said in a calm tone. “You will do battle with all sorts of enemies in the future, which is why we’re going to start with a solid overview of the absolute basics—though I’m sure you’ve already mastered them.”

She inspected each of our faces with a critical eye. “You there, Noir Stardia, step forward and draw your weapon.”

I did as I was told, and Ms. Elena raised an eyebrow. “That’s a nice sword you have there.”

“My father gave it to me.”

“All right, attack me. Try to kill me, if you will.”

“Kill you?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t even scratch me.” She was incredibly confident, but I wondered if she could back that up.

Name: Elena Stongs

Age: 24

Species: Human

Level: 232

Occupation: Academy Instructor

Skills: Stamina Up; Martial Arts (Grade A); One-Handed Swordsmanship (Grade A); Piercing; Earthen Wall; Earthen Bullet; Heal

Wow! She wasn’t kidding. She was over Level 200 and had tons of incredibly

powerful skills. The whole mercenary-since-the-age-of-seven spiel wasn't just to impress the newbies.

"What's wrong?" she said. "Come at me."

"Yes, ma'am."

I decided to use all the force I could muster. She was so beyond me in terms of experience, I couldn't afford to pull any punches. I launched myself off the ground and charged. I closed the distance between us and slashed horizontally—and I got her!

Or at least, I thought I did, but to my shock, she retreated with almost inhuman speed. My blade hit nothing but air, and I lost my balance. As I frantically attempted to regain my footing—bonk! Out of nowhere, Ms. Elena's hand smacked me on the head. I was completely awestruck, but she seemed a little surprised too.

"Not half bad," she said. "You're pretty strong, kid. You're over Level 30?"

"Somewhere around there."

"Your footwork and swings weren't terrible, but you have a lot of room to improve."

"I'll...try to keep that in mind."

"Oh, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Also," she announced to the other students "That move I just used is what you'll be learning today."

The back-step—a handy evasive maneuver in battle.

"Honestly, I'm surprised that so many of you can't do it. I've seen what happens to people who misjudge their steps up close."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"You sure you wanna know the answer to that, Noir?" she said with an impish smirk.

I shook my head, deeply regretting my smart mouth. That didn't stop her from describing in gory detail exactly what it looked like when people's guts fell out of their abdomens.

“Anyway, you’re going to keep working on this today until you can dodge one of my attacks,” she said. That must’ve been what the wooden sword was for. If she used a real one, we’d be annihilated. “You’re up first, Noir.”

“What? But I just went.”

“No whining. Life isn’t fair.”

“Hmph.”

“Heh, you’re a funny one. How’s this? If you can execute a proper back-step in less than three tries, I’ll give you a reward.”

A reward? My one weakness... I couldn’t help thinking of the possibilities.

“I’ll sit on you.”

I balked. “What kind of reward is that?”

“All right, let’s get started.”

I had to wonder if her overbearing attitude was a requirement for being a mercenary. I might end up in that sort of work in the future, so I needed to learn from her, if so. We faced off again, but this time I was the one avoiding the attack. I only had to dodge once to win. Just once. I watched her movements and waited for her attack when—owww?! “Urgh.”

“Oh, sorry, was that a little too hard? I have a hard time judging that sort of thing.”

She was way, way too fast. She smacked me flat in the stomach with her wooden sword while I was still frantically trying to wheel back. The impact was so intense that my insides desperately wanted to be my outsides. Puke. I mean I was going to puke.

“Oh, lemme fix that. Heal.” She placed her hands on my stomach, where they glowed white. The agony quickly dissipated. “Remember that pain. Learn from it.”

“You hurt me on purpose? I thought you said you just had a hard time judging how much force to use.”

“Ha ha ha, yeah. Well, I’ll be more careful next time. Stand up.”

It sounded like she was going to make me do this forever. She was merciless. I didn't want to get hit again, even if she was going to go easier on me. But then it occurred me: I could just make myself a C-Grade martial arts skill! Except that it would cost 1,000 LP. So I shifted tactics and tried making Improved Back-Step. It was only 200 LP, so I went with it.

"Here I come!" Ms. Elena shouted.

"Huh?"

She seemed to move faster than before, but I didn't have time to worry about that. I needed to dodge!

"Too bad, you're not fast enou—huh?!"

My feet slid over the sand. Somehow, I dodged, if barely. My evasive speed had increased just enough that I managed to avoid her wooden sword.

"How?! I was moving even faster this time..."

"That was unkind of you, Ms. Elena."

Ms. Elena was at a total loss for words.

Chapter 17:

Things Not to Do During Class

THE S-CLASS HOMEROOM TEACHER, Ms. Elena, was a pretty astute person. On one hand, she'd claimed she couldn't judge her own strength, all the while precisely judging her students' abilities. After my turn, she went through each student and practiced their back-steps, carefully matching her strength to theirs. Just as she had with me, she motivated the other boys by offering a reward but, in the end, I was the only one that got a hit off on her. Once everyone was done practicing, she commanded me to lay on the ground.

"You mean right here?"

"Yes, now hurry up."

I lay in the sand on my back and, without missing beat, Ms. Elena sat down on my stomach.

"I'm a woman of my word, after all," she said.

The boys all oohed and aahed with jealousy. Honestly, I didn't really get it. I personally found it more uncomfortable than anything.

"As a mercenary, you have to abide by your client's requests. The majority of the men I worked for praised my behind, but few were foolish enough to try to touch it. I made sure that those who lacked the presence of mind to control themselves immediately regretted it."

She lifted her shapely backside up and set it down again.

"Ah hng haa..."

I made pained sounds as she tortured my abs. When she was done, she moved up to my chest. Was this some kind of niche fetish I'd never heard of?!

"So, how are you feeling now, Noir?"

"Uh, it's hard to breathe?"

"Well, romance between teachers and students isn't explicitly forbidden, but

you're too low a level for me to fall for you."

"I'm not having a hard time...breathing...because I'm in love with you. It's just the weight of your—"

"Silence."

She shifted to sit directly on my face. I couldn't breathe at all, but it was only for a second so I didn't asphyxiate.

After our "training" session was over, she released me. I was still pretty confused by what had just happened—not in a bad kind of way, mind you. Thanking her somehow seemed like the right thing. I even got 400 LP out of it. As I returned to my classmates, several of the boys peppered me with questions.

"What did her butt smell like?"

"I didn't really have time to think about it...?"

"Was it soft?"

"Uh, kind of, I guess?"

"Maaan! I wanna do that!"

"Shut your mouths." Ms. Elena glared at the boys and raked her fingers through her hair. "Anyway, as you can see, I take a more physical approach to teaching, so make sure you keep up. Next, form teams of two."

At first, it seemed it didn't matter who we teamed up with. Of course, Emma ran over to me, looking happy. "Let's team up!"

"Good idea."

But Ms. Elena shook her head. "Nope. Noir, Emma, you two can't team up." When Emma asked why, she responded: "You two are an item, right? We can't be encouraging that sort of thing here."

"Uh, Emma and I aren't dating."

"Is that true, Emma?"

"Yes, we aren't dating yet, ma'am."

“I see. Well, even if you’re not romantically entangled, you’re long-term friends. Either way, you can’t be a team. You two girls, come here.”

She called over a pair of elegant girls. One of them was Maria, the duke’s daughter, and the other was a pretty girl with her black hair tied up in a ponytail. She was tall and graceful with piercing eyes.

“You two can’t be a team either,” said Ms. Elena. “You’re one of Maria’s attendants, aren’t you?”

“I am. What of it?”

“Don’t you glare at me. You’re with Emma. Maria, you’re with Noir.”

The girl with the ponytail looked profoundly dissatisfied. She seemed extremely powerful too. Not as impressive as Ms. Elena, but still strong. And she seemed to have the mental fortitude to go with it.

“I will be quite all right, Amane. Please, team up with Miss Emma.” Maria flashed an angelic smile.

Amane sighed before turning to me. “Mr. Stardia, I require thirty seconds of your time.”

“Uh, okay.”

Ms. Elena nodded her approval, and I followed Amane. She took me out of earshot of the rest of the class before she spoke. “Maria is ill, so please don’t make her exert herself too much.”

My initial instinct was to bring up the curse, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like Amane would only ask how I knew—and that might get rough. So, I held my tongue. “Got it. I’ll be careful.”

“I appreciate it.”

I stopped her as she was about to return to the class. I couldn’t help myself. There was something I was curious about. Amane just looked at me, glacially impassive as ever.

“Lady Amane, you’re the daughter of a marquess, right? Why do you wait on Lady Maria?”

“For much the same reason you spend so much time with Miss Brightness.”

“So...you’ve been friends since you were kids?”

“Precisely.”

“Um, I’m not sure if this is appropriate, but how long has Lady Maria been ill?”

“Since she was born. We really ought to get going.” It seemed like she really didn’t want to get into it. Fair enough.

Once we were back with the others, we got straight to practice. This time, we wouldn’t be using weapons.

“In hand-to-hand combat, you might end up in situations where your enemy will try to throw you. So next we’ll be learning how to defend against that. Noir, stand here.”

“Do you have a crush on me or something, Ms. Elena?”

“Don’t make me laugh. Now get over here.”

I shrank, fearing I was in for another round of abject agony, but I needn’t have worried—I was the one doing the throwing.

“I want you to use a shoulder throw. Pull me onto your shoulder and flip me.”

I started by grabbing one of Ms. Elena’s arms and then tried to get a grip on her shirt, but my hand ended up right on her chest. Erk.

“What are you hesitating for?”

“Oh, uh, I’m not sure how I should say this, but...”

“What? Worried about your fingers touching my chest? What are you, some blushing bride?!”

“U-understood, ma’am!”

I got a firm grip on her chest and pulled her toward me. Then I twisted my body to get her onto my back and threw her to the ground.

Or at least that was the idea, but I didn’t want to hurt her, so I didn’t actually let go. She tucked her chin so she wouldn’t hit her head and used her hands to

soften her landing. Then she popped right back up.

“This is how you take a throw properly. You can get the wind knocked out of you when your back hits the ground, but it’s better than the alternative. It’s also worth noting that he softened his throw just now. In a real combat situation, you’ll just be tossed onto the ground and get your face stomped on.”

“That sounds a little excessive...” I muttered.

“Generally, the idea is to not get thrown in the first place of course. Now, Noir and Maria, you try it.”

She wanted to use us as another example.

“Very well. Mr. Noir,” said Maria. “Please go ahead and throw me then.”

I winced. “I think you should do the throwing.”

“Oh, but I must insist.”

“No, I mean, I’m a man, so—”

“What are you two yammering on about? Just throw Noir already.” Ms. Elena was getting irritated by our dithering.

I felt suddenly shy as I stood in front of Maria, what with her porcelain skin, pink lips, and perfectly proportioned body. Tentatively, she reached for me with one pale hand and meekly gripped my chest.

“Lady Amane told me that you’re ill,” I whispered. “Are you—”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort. I simply have not had much occasion to touch men, so I’m rather n-nervous.”

“You two...” Ms. Elena was glaring openly. “Could you two knock it off already? This old lady’s had about as much of it as she can take.”

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Old Lady,” I called back.

“Noir...if you screw this up, I’m making you run ten laps around the yard at a full sprint.”

Me and my mouth. “Hey, you’re the one who called yourself an old lady, I was just—”

“No excuses.”

“Fine,” I said. “Just give me twenty seconds.”

“Very well.”

I just needed to figure out what skill to use to take the hit...

Passive Defense — 30 LP

It was shockingly cheap too, probably because it was such a basic skill. Or maybe I just had a particular talent for taking hits to begin with? I guess I had spent most of my life getting kicked while I was down. Ignoring the deep existential questions about the troubling course of my life thus far, I acquired the skill.

“I shall proceed,” said Maria.

“Be my guest.”

I suddenly felt my body lift off the ground. Regardless of any curses or boy-oriented timidity, Maria was extremely skilled at the technique. She threw me with ease. My hands smacked against the ground and I let myself down safely. She had thrown me gently, so the impact wasn’t that hard. I picked myself up and waited patiently for Ms. Elena to give her assessment.

“.....”

“Er, Ms. Elena? How did I do?”

“Tch.”

“Did I do better than you expected?” I asked. “Is that what the tongue click means?”

“To be honest, you might have more of a knack for this than I do.”

“Ah. Thank you very much.” I definitely felt a little smug. More importantly, it was worth it just so I didn’t have to do ten laps. But just as I was about to celebrate—

“Maria!” Amane ran over at full speed.

“Huh?”

Maria was clutching her chest and looked like she was in some serious pain.

“I-I am fine. My chest merely hurts a bit.”

“You need rest. You mustn’t force yourself.”

“Truly,” said Maria. “I am quite all right.”

“I cannot approve. Ms. Elena?”

“Uh, yeah, take a break.”

Maria had already caught her breath, so it didn’t seem all that bad, but I guess they wanted to be extra careful. Maria lowered her head apologetically as she walked past me, supported on Amane’s shoulder. “I am so sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t much of a partner in the end.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just get some rest.”

“Thank you.”

I activated my Editor skill as I watched her walk off.

Sixteenth Year Death Curse: A curse skill. Causes the owner’s entire body to be wracked with intense pain at regular intervals. The symptoms worsen as the skill owner ages, peaking in their sixteenth year. The skill disappears if the owner makes it through their sixteenth year.

Change “sixteenth” to “fifteenth” — 8,000 LP

“Sixteenth Year Death Curse” will be removed.

Ugh. It was way too expensive. Edits that would nullify and ultimately remove skills required much more LP, and I’d never had even close to that much at one time. That’s just how powerful curses were. Increasing the age from sixteen to seventeen had no effect on the cost either, but the more I saw, the more I

wanted to help Maria.

Answer me, Great Sage, what is the fastest way I can earn LP right now?

<Your answer is thus: first, line up all the women in your presence at the moment.>

It must've been a difficult question because my head hurt more than usual, but I pushed through.

<Next, run past them, swiping your hand over their breasts as you do. If you touch them all, you can earn 2,000 LP.>

"What?! I'm not gonna do that! And my head hurts like hell!" Even with the Headache Immunity skill, some things were just too much. It seemed like LP-related questions had a high cost. I didn't think I could take it any longer, so I grabbed Emma's shoulder. "Hey, could you give me our special hello for the day?"

"What?! Right here?! But everyone's looking..."

"I can't take it anymore! Please, I'm sorry!" I planted my lips on hers as the entire class stared. "Ahh...that feels better..."

I let out a sigh of relief, but everyone else was frozen in shock. Suddenly, an intense heat flared behind me. When I turned to see where the hostility was emanating from, I saw Ms. Elena standing there, mouth twitching. "You know we're in class right now, don't you?"

"I-It was an emergency..."

"Fifteen laps."

"Yes, ma'am."

"At a full sprint!"

"Yes, ma'aaaaaam!" I took off running. I didn't have much choice, since Ms. Elena was chasing after me, swinging her wooden sword.

Chapter 18:

A Smelly Pair

WITH THE FIRST DAY of class over, Emma and I left the academy and headed for the guild hall. We figured we might as well take on a request while we were out and about.

“Noir, don’t you think everyone’s gonna assume we’re dating?”

Emma chatted as we walked, but I couldn’t get my mind off Maria. It would cost me 8,000 LP to remove the curse. If I wanted to manage it, I was going to have to figure out a way to farm a massive amount of LP.

While I was lost in thought, I noticed a copper coin on the ground and picked it up. It looked like something someone had dropped.

“But, you know, I didn’t expect you to just surprise me with a kiss like that, Noir! O-of course I know you must’ve needed to do it because you used your Great Sage skill for some reason, but still!”

I found another coin. It was kinda weird to find two so fast.

“Hey, are you listening? Wait...did you find another coin?”

“Seems like it.”

“Must be your lucky day.”

Lucky... Oh, right, it must be thanks to the Good Luck skill on the sword! I’d had the sword on my hip all day. That explained the rapid succession of good things happening.

“That reminds me,” I said. “I wanted to ask you something about Maria.”

“Why are you bringing her up when you’re spending time with me?”

“This is serious!”

“Is it really?”

“She’s going to die soon.”

“Wait a minute, that really is serious!”

That's what I said!

Emma's face went white as I explained the Sixteenth Year Death Curse. She clearly agreed that it was desperately unfair that such a kind and courteous girl was on the verge of death.

"I want to help her," I said.

"Yeah... Yeah, me too! But let's get to the guild first."

There were adventurers from all walks of life in Odin, and the receptionists knew all about skills too. They must have had to study them, or they'd have a tough time while registering new adventurers.

"Hello, Lola," I called as we walked in.

"Mr. Noir?! Uh, why are you here now?!" Lola hid her face behind her hands. She seemed...flustered?

I tilted my head. Weird. "Sorry, school started today," I explained, "so I'll have to stop by in the afternoon from now on."

"I wish you woulda said earlier! I'm not prepared! Give me ten...no, five minutes please!" Lola bolted through a staff door, still hiding her face behind her hands.

I had absolutely no idea what had just happened, but one of the other receptionists took pity and filled me in. "She's fixing her makeup. She didn't think you were coming today, so she was a little sloppy about it."

I suppose Lola did look a little different today, but she had such nice skin that I was sure she'd look stunning without any makeup on at all.

"Noir," said Emma. "Forget about that stupid tarded-up receptionist and let's go."

"I can't do that, she's my manager."

"You're so stupid," she muttered.

"Thanks for waiting!" Lola burst back through the door, wearing a warm smile and flawless makeup—I assume.

Once she was settled at her station, I asked her about the Sixteenth Year

Death Curse.

“Hmm, I’ve heard of a few death curses before. Unfortunately, the survival rate is incredibly low. They’re sometimes conferred as curse skills by attacks from demonic monsters.” She could also recall some historical adventurers who perished after failing to lift similar curses.

“So, there’s no way to get rid of them?” I asked.

“Typically, you’d go to a priest, or holy woman, or someone like that. They can lift less serious curses.”

“I’ve got a friend who needs this sort of help, so if you know someone good, I’d appreciate their name.”

Lola brought a finger to her chin. It must’ve been a difficult question, especially since she was probably taking my financial situation into consideration too. “It’s not that I don’t know *anyone* who could fit the bill. I do have a friend who is a very talented cleric, but she doesn’t have much experience with curse skills.”

“But she’s good at what she does?”

“Extremely. She’s removed many such skills, but...”

“Please introduce us.” If her services were going to be expensive, I could always just introduce her to Maria directly. I mean, her family was loaded, surely they’d pay anything for the chance of Maria’s survival.

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll talk to her. I’ll ask her to make some time tomorrow.”

“I appreciate it. Though, while we’re here, do you have a request for us today?”

“I did just get something in. What do you think of this?”

The request was for the delivery of yomir herbs. They grew in the forest, but it was exceptionally difficult to tell them apart from their deadly poisonous counterparts. It wasn’t a job Lola would usually offer to someone who wasn’t an expert, but she made an exception for me since she knew about my Discerning Eye for Items.

“We’re swimming in requests for them, so bring in as many as you can find. They’re 10,000 rels a piece.”

I couldn’t exactly say no to such a juicy prospect.

“But I have to warn you, there are trolls in Jibbon Forest. They seem to congregate near where the yomir herbs are found.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

With that, Emma and I set out for the forest. We had to hurry. We didn’t want to get stuck there after dark.

When we got there, it seemed we’d worried too much. Aside from the occasional bird chirping, Jibbon Forest was dead silent. I’d been there once before as a child with my father, so I had a feeling about where the herbs might grow. After about a five-minute walk, we found the spot I had in mind.

“Hey, yomir herb has white flowers, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe that’s it then.”

The lush carpet of white flowers was pretty hard to miss. I used my Discerning Eye for Items on it.

Poison. Poison. Poison. Poison. Poison. Poison. Poison. Poison. Poison.

Well, that wasn’t great. As an aside, poisonous herbs apparently also had grades. All of these were C-Grade.

“Well?” asked Emma.

“They’re all low-grade poisonous herbs.”

“Hmm, I guess we have to go deeper into the forest. Let’s get going.”

Soon enough, we found another spot where a different plant with white flowers was growing. I asked Emma to stand guard while I checked, but then we heard a rustling sound overhead.

“Grrrr!”

“I don’t think so!”

“Gyah!”

That really startled me. A goblin was hiding up in the treetops and tried to drop down and ambush us. In a split second, Emma slashed it with her daggers before it could reach me. She looked so cool, slicing it to ribbons in midair, but her approach wasn't without its flaws. For example, my arm got splattered in blood.

"Oh, sorry!"

"It's fine. Not much you coulda done to stop it."

"Here." She offered me a handkerchief.

My family wasn't in a financial position to buy them very often, so I didn't carry one regularly. I felt a little bad about getting hers dirty. The goblin's green blood was really sticky.

"Don't worry about it," she insisted. "That one was cheap!"

"You're too kind."

"Heh, I know. I'm 50 percent kindness, you know."

"What's the other 50 percent?"

"Well, um, it's, uh, y-you know..."

"I know what?"

"My...my feelings for..."

"For?"

"Look, Noir, I—"

"Look out!"

A goblin leapt out of a shrub. Pretty crafty. It must've been lying in wait.

It lurched toward Emma, but I darted forward and felled it with my sword. My new two-edged blade was exquisitely sharp. Just grazing the goblin sliced its throat open. That must have been thanks to the Sharp Edge skill.

"Oh."

"I-I-I-I'm fine. Yeah! Totally—blegh!" Emma started puking. Turned out my technique could use some work, too. She'd gotten a face full of goblin blood.

The stench was even worse. Sure, you could wipe it off, but it wasn't easy on the nose. Emma was gasping for breath. "Ugh, I'm trying to hold it together, but the smell is awful."

"The two of us pack a pretty big one-two punch now," I said. "I bet we could clear a room without lifting a finger."

"Ah ha ha ha, everyone's probably going to avoid us when we go back to town. Even our families."

"Now that's depressing."

"But not us, right?" Emma said. "We're partners in stink."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that."

I decided to try making a skill that could remove the smell.

Deodorize — 80 LP

I was trying to save LP to help Maria, but I didn't feel like I had much of a choice. We'd be social pariahs smelling like this—maybe even exiled from the town.

"Ha!" I started by Deodorizing myself. The skill seemed to work by removing the stink from whatever I touched. The one catch was that really egregious smells would require a different skill—Super Deodorize—but I hoped this was enough for goblin blood. Upon sniffing myself, I appeared to be in luck. "Sorry for cleaning myself up first, Emma."

"Hurry up and use that on me too!"

"Tell me a joke first."

"You're the worst!"

"Hey," I said. "you pull it on me all the time over lunch."

"That's different..."

"Come on, get it over with."

I waited. Emma groaned and sauntered over to a nearby tree. She placed one hand on it, and used her other to flip her hair over her shoulder. “Even if the whole world turned against you,” she said. “I’d still be on your side, Noir.”

“I don’t get it?”

“Oh, come on! I thought I’d come up with a cheesy line that stank as much as I do.”

“Would you really though?” I asked. “Stick by me.”

She nodded. “That’s one thing I can say with confidence.”

“Then say it like you mean it.”

“I absolutely would!”

That made me genuinely happy. I went ahead and deodorized her.

Crap, this is no time to be screwing around, we have herbs to find.

Chapter 19: Of Trolls and Grasshoppers

WE MOVED DEEPER into the forest in search of yomir herbs, but they were as hard to find as their price suggested. Everything we found was varying grades of completely poisonous. I couldn't even imagine how you'd find the herbs without a Discerning Eye for Items. Ultimately, I decided to call on the Great Sage and ask where the nearest ones were.

<You will find precisely three plants if you walk approximately two hundred yards straight forward.>

Thankfully, this exchange barely gave me a headache. We followed the information, found the plants just where they were supposed to be, and picked them all. They really did look almost exactly like the poisonous ones. I had no idea how anyone, even an expert, could tell them apart.

Given that just one of them was worth 10,000 rels, so I wanted to try to find a few more, but Emma looked a little anxious when I mentioned it.

"Didn't Lola say that trolls tend to appear where the plants grow?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess she did."

"They have really high attack power. Even one hit would be really serious."

"Oh..." I might be officially lucky now, but I didn't exactly want to push it.

"Well, I guess we fulfilled the request. We can probably just go home."

"That's what I was thinking... Until I remembered that troll tongues are supposed to be delicious." Emma bit her lip. "Eating one might give you a big LP boost, Noir."

"Huh, I'd definitely like to try it, if possible."

Emma nodded. "And I bet we could take one if we got the jump on it! Think the Great Sage could help us find one?"

"Lemme see." I asked the Great Sage, and sure enough, there was a troll

about three hundred yards east of us.

“Should we try to lure it out and into a trap?” Emma asked.

“It might work, but if it’s really high level, we should make a run for it.”

“Sounds good to me!”

We quickly settled on baiting a pit trap. I retrieved the shovel I’d used to unearth my sword and started digging where the ground seemed soft. I’d heard that trolls were typically over six feet tall and pretty hefty, so the hole needed to be fairly large, but my Excavate skill made quick work of it. I took care to position the pit so it was concealed by some shrubs. Trolls weren’t all that smart, so I had high hopes that it would work.

Once we were prepared, we headed toward the troll. We crept carefully, concealing the sound of our footsteps—but froze when we heard a horrible shriek just ahead. It sounded kind of like a goblin. Suddenly, an enormous shape lurched into the clearing just ahead of us—there it was, the troll we were after!

We hid ourselves behind a tree. It really was massive; its arms and legs were thick as tree trunks. It had red-brown skin and sunken eyes that made its face look almost like a mask. But what we really needed to watch out for was its weapon. It was straight-up brandishing an entire tree, freshly ripped right out of the ground. And it had just squashed a goblin like a bug.

Emma and I exchanged a silent nod and attacked simultaneously. Emma used Wind Strike, and I shot off a fifteen-inch Stone Bullet. I opted for that size because anything larger would slow the projectile down.

“Bwaaar!” The troll had pretty good reflexes and blocked both the wind blast and the stone. It was Level 25 and had the three skills: Strength Up, Physical Defense Up, and Resist Poison.

“We’re right over here! Come and get us!”

“Come on, you ogre! We’re gonna spank your ass!”

Emma...that’s a troll, not an ogre. And what kind of taunt is that?

“Bwaaaaaarh!”

Either way, it worked pretty darn well. I probably owed her an apology.

Once we'd provoked the troll into giving chase, we took off. The troll was as slow as it looked, and we easily put distance between us. We took care not to get too far ahead, held our breath, and jumped.

"Hyup!"

We vaulted over the shrubs and landed on the other side of the hole. The troll grew closer, its lumbering footsteps echoing through the forest.

Fall in! Don't notice it!

But something seemed to catch the troll's attention and—

"Hyup!"

The troll leaped over it, just like we just had. It wasn't just a leap either, it went flying. The troll soared through the air over our heads—giving us an unsettlingly clear view of something no one deserved to see—and landed behind us.

"Noir, I saw right between its leeeegs..."

"Yeah... My eyes will never be the same again..."

As frustrating as it was that our plan failed, we couldn't let it get to us. We had to switch gears to a direct confrontation. The troll was nothing compared to a dead reaper, but its attack power was so high, we couldn't afford to drop our guard.

"Bwar bwar bwaaarh!"

The troll swung its tree around, but it was pretty slow and none of the swings hit us. Even so, we didn't dare approach. It withstood a direct hit from Emma's Wind Strike just fine, and my Stone Bullets were physical attacks, so they didn't do much damage. I considered roasting it with Holy Flame, but if the tongue got burned, it would defeat the whole purpose of this diversion.

"Noir, think you could distract it for just a second? I'm gonna go for its neck."

"Got it!"

The most important part of this kind of distraction was making sure that the target couldn't act. The troll was mindlessly roaring and swinging its tree-club

around like it was the only trick its tiny brain was capable of retaining. I needed to come up with something that it would actually notice.

200lb Weight Increase — 200 LP

It would cost me another 800 LP to Bestow it on the troll. I didn't even have 1,000 LP left, so that was out. But then I thought about Bestowing it on the tree. That dropped the cost of Bestowing to a mere 50 LP, probably because the tree was a low-grade item. I promptly spent the 250 LP required, drastically increasing the weight of the troll's impromptu weapon.

"Hrngh?!"

The tree smashed into the ground with a thud. The troll couldn't support it anymore. Its eyes went wide with confusion.

"Emma!"

"I got this!"

Emma's daggers neatly pierced both sides of the troll's head, delving into its brain and securing our teamwork victory. Once the giant collapsed, Emma even leveled up.

After confirming it was dead, she looked at me, slightly puzzled. "What'd you do?"

"I made its weapon heavier."

"Oh! Well, we both got out unharmed, so I guess that was the right move."

"Yeah. Let's get that tongue and go home."

It turned out troll tongues were surprisingly long, and a luscious pink color too.

Luckily, we made it back to the guild hall before night fell and completed the request. We sold the three plants for a profit of 30,000 rels, which I split evenly with Emma.

"See you again tomorrow! Bye!"

“Bye!”

At last, I headed home. When I asked my mother if she’d like to share the troll tongue with me, she grinned from ear to ear. Apparently, she’d had it before and, judging from her reaction, I was in for a treat. And so the Stardia family dinner table looked a little more sumptuous than usual with the eye-catching additions of a perfectly grilled troll tongue and inky black insects.

“So these grasshoppers were pickled in soy?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s very tasty.”

My mother hummed to herself, but Alice and my father looked like death had touched their very souls. I couldn’t exactly blame them, a pile of dead bugs was pretty grotesque by most standards.

“Would you like some, Noir?” my mother asked.

“S-sure.”

Soy sauce came to this world several hundred years ago when a chef from an alternate dimension ended up here and popularized it. Apparently, he also introduced miso and seven-spice blend, along with numerous recipes. That’s where chopsticks came from too, though we were more of a knife and fork family.

“Did this recipe come from that parallel universe?” I asked.

“It did. We must be grateful to them. Come on now,” my mother said, urging me to eat.

I skewered a grasshopper with my fork and brought it to my mouth. It took all my courage just to open my mouth and place it on my tongue. I mean, it might be dead, but it was still a little black critter going down my throat.

To my surprise, it was actually pretty tasty. It had a pleasant crunch and was a lot more flavorful than I’d expected—nice and sweet and savory. I’d had shrimp prepared in a similar fashion, and this wasn’t all that different. They didn’t smell weird or anything either. Maybe grasshoppers didn’t taste like much to begin with. My mother was waiting to hear my thoughts, so I gave her my honest—surprisingly pleased—opinion.

“I knew you’d get it!” She looked so happy. I guess she was usually the odd one out, so she was excited to finally have someone to share her tastes with.

“I-I’ve lost my dearest brother to the other camp...” said Alice.

“No, he isn’t lost,” said father. “The pure, sweet Noir we once knew no longer exists. He’s gone.”

“Brother dearest, please come back to us...”

“You’re going to make your father cry...”

My father and Alice were blowing the whole situation out of proportion. If nothing else, it wasn’t that bad. I could even see myself getting hooked on the little guys.

Now the troll tongue, on the other hand, had a much more exciting flavor. It was seasoned with only a light sprinkling of salt but it had the most delightful texture. It reminded me a little of beef tongue. It was so firm I could have chewed on it forever—and the more I chewed, the more the delicious flavor filled my mouth. To top it all off, my LP shot up to 1,500!

I’d already earned over a million rels today, too. A perfect end to a perfect first day of school!

Chapter 20:

Olivia's Lessons

WE HAD THE DAY off school, so I decided to head to the hidden dungeon. The meeting Lola had set up with that cleric wasn't until that evening, so I had plenty of time to kill. First, I hunted some more golden slimes on the first floor. Their delectably sweet jelly filled my mouth and filled the rest of me with happiness.

"They really are delicious."

The levels I earned in the process were a nice bonus too. All I really had to worry about was their corrosive spit, which by now I knew how to dodge. Today's harvest got me up to Level 42, which was good enough for me. Then I headed to the second floor to see Olivia. I wanted to ask her for advice about Maria's curse.

<Hmm, that sounds kinda like it might be a family curse.> "You mean like one of her ancestors got cursed?"

<Yeah, exactly! Sometimes someone earns another person's ire and their grandkids end up born with curse skills.> If that was it, then Maria was suffering through no fault of her own. That just made me want to help her even more. Apparently, there was also a skill that could lift the curse, so I thought I'd try to make it, but my hopes were dashed immediately—the LP required was in five digits.

<Why don't you just chill and let that cleric handle it? If she has the appropriate kind of skill, she's probably got some elf blood in her. They do call elves the uncorrupted race, after all.> "An elf, huh? I dunno if I've even talked to one before."

<Other species are great! You get a lot of extra LP with 'em.> "Really?! I'll have to take advantage of that."

<You better!>

I felt a little embarrassed to be on the same page as Olivia for once. At any rate, I wanted to tackle the fifth floor next. I needed to get stronger, and also

wanted to find treasure and raw materials from monsters. I mentioned what the ghosts on the fourth floor had said about the giant monsters on the fifth floor to my master; she surely had some strategy tips.

<If you're looking for the best bang for your buck, I'd recommend Blinding Light. It's super useful when you have to bail on a fight.> I liked the sound of that.

Blinding Light — 200 LP

I'd earned a bunch of LP yesterday and topped up with my mother, Alice, and Emma already, so I didn't even hesitate. I was so eager, I immediately decided to try it out. When I cast the spell, a flash of light shot from the tip of my index finger.

It was blindingly bright! It seemed like the perfect way to create a distraction, but there was one problem—I'd neglected to close my eyes, so I could barely see. What a boneheaded move. I heard my master's shrill voice as I rubbed my eyes, cackling at my poor decision making.

<Oh my god! That was like, totally radical! You're so rad today, Noir! Your bodacious babe of a master might just fall for you at this rate!> "Master...no one says 'radical' and 'bodacious' anymore."

<No way! They were all the rage back in my day. Don't tell me they stopped calling penniless nobles 'noufaux riche' too!> "Yeah, no one uses that either. Though if there's anyone that one would apply to, it's me."

<Ah ha ha ha! Don't you worry about that, money's easy to get.> "Money's one thing, but I'm really more interested in LP right now."

<Well, if you want the great and powerful Olivia's knowledge, you must first make her laugh!> I had a feeling this was coming; she always teased me like this. Despite her age, my master still had quite a mischievous side. That said, if she knew how I could earn more LP, I couldn't hesitate.

<Anything's fine as long as you make me laugh.>

“Got it.”

I got down on all fours and started sniffing around. When she asked if I was supposed to be a dog, I responded with a bark. Then I sniffed my own crotch and dramatically collapsed on the ground. I flopped around a little and rolled my eyes back like I’d died.

“I give you...a dog who died after sniffing his own crotch...ma’am.”

<What a dumb dog! You oughta be more careful with that sharp nose of yours!> The joke was a little dirty, but I got a cackle out of her, so I guess I succeeded?

<That was pretty funny, so I’ll give you some more advice: try making the skill Magical Fusion.> “That sounds powerful.”

<It’s real useful. It does exactly what it sounds like, and it’s especially powerful when combined with combat magic. It should work with your Stone Bullet and Holy Flame.> I quickly spent the 500 LP to make the spell and then, following her advice, used it to combine the two spells in question, producing a stone that burned with white flame.

“That’s so cool!”

<It has the same elemental properties as Holy Flame and you can change the size of the Stone Bullet too. Just be careful not to use up all your magic.> I fired it as a test and was pleased to discover that it was just as easy to use as the vanilla spells.

<The one thing you have to keep in mind is spell compatibility. The typical example everyone uses is trying to mix water and fire spells—the less compatible two spells are, the higher the cost.> “I’ll keep that in mind.”

<There are all sorts of good combos though. You should try mixing and matching as you learn more.> With such a capable person guiding me, I felt like the world was my oyster. I was satisfied with the tip she gave me, but she still had an impish smirk on her face.

“What? Is there something else?”

<I do have one more tip, about min-maxing your performance.> “Do I have to

make you laugh again?”

<No, this time I'll let it go for the low price of a compliment.> “Master, I think you're a beautiful lady who's bright, playful, and optimistic.”

<Ooh, I'm a beautiful lady now, am I? Am I really that old...?> “Pretty girl then.”

<I can't hear you.>

“You're a pretty girl!”

<I feel two hundred years younger already!>

That probably took off a few too many years then... She seemed happy though, so for once I kept my snark to myself.

<All right, here's another must-have skill: Lucky Lecher.> Something about that phrase set my hetero instincts on fire.

<There's a fixed chance of it activating automatically when a member of the opposite sex is in your vicinity. You'll earn LP and some nice memories too—two birds, one stone!> “I'm not sure I believe that, but if it'll earn me LP, I guess I have to.”

<He he he, you're such a bad boy, Noir.>

I was really, definitely only doing it for the LP.

Lucky Lecher — 300 LP

I got the skill with no trouble. It actually seemed a little cheap. After that, I finished my business with my master and set out for the fifth floor—using the Dungeon Elevator to open up a hole in front of me.

“Speaking of smells, you haven't bathed in over two hundred years mast—actually, I should be on my way!”

<You're holding your nose? Could you get any ruder? Do I really smell that bad?!> “Heh, a gentleman never tells,” I teased and jumped into the hole.

She really didn't smell at all, if I was being honest. And even if she did, I'd have been happy to Deodorize her.

Chapter 21:

The Monster Den on the Fifth Floor

I GOT TO THE FIFTH FLOOR and checked my immediate surroundings, but there were no monsters. Momentarily relieved, I proceeded along the floor with my guard up. The halls here were particularly wide, probably around thirty feet. They made it easy to swing a sword, but they also made the whole situation scarier. They must've been built that way to accommodate swarms of large monsters.

Something caught my attention, and I flattened myself against a wall at the end of the hall. I could hear a rustling noise.

"Huh?!" I slapped a hand over my mouth, desperate to keep myself from making another sound.

Just beyond the hall was a giant ant, about ten feet long, eating a meal. The other creature squirmed and struggled as the ant consumed it. It looked like a buffalo—a generally strong and ferocious animal that, somehow, hadn't stood a chance against the ant.

I marveled at the strength of the ant's jaws—even a regular ant could easily carry something well over ten times its own body weight. I remembered a scholar once saying that giant ants would be dangerously dangerous.

Dangerously dangerous, really? The phrasing was so bad I had dismissed the idea entirely.

Name: Giant Pincer Ant

Level: 45

Skills: Agility Up; Carrying Capacity; Powerful Pincers

I shuddered. I probably wouldn't be able to escape if that thing got me in its pincers. That said, it wasn't as high a level as I'd expected. I wasn't sure what to

do. I was scared, but I felt like I should fight it. It was distracted with its meal too, so it seemed like a prime opportunity.

I figured I might as well use what I'd just learned, so I summoned a fiery Stone Bullet. I quietly poked my head around the corner and fired the burning three-foot stone at the giant ant. The boulder roared through the air, clad in white flame.

The ant noticed the attack and used the buffalo as a shield. The carcass was quickly consumed by white flame. The ant hurled it away and skittered toward me. It moved at incredible speed! If I hadn't dodged it with a back-step, I would've been ant food. All of Ms. Elena's practice really saved my butt.

I put some space between myself and the creature and fired off a normal-size Stone Bullet before closing the distance again. The stone smashed into the ant without doing much damage, but it was enough of a distraction that I was able to slice off one of the ant's antennae with my sword. I took the opportunity to retreat and prepare for another attack. The ant clicked its pincers menacingly and came at me again. Kind of?

"Huh?"

I was completely baffled. The ant was spinning in circles. It took me a second to realize that this must be happening because it had lost an antenna. I couldn't let the opportunity pass by, so I fired off another flaming Stone Bullet.

Pew! Fwump! Bwam!

The projectile pierced the ant's abdomen and came right out the other side, setting it on fire to boot. The whole beast went up like tinder.

"Whoa, the heat's intense."

I dodged between the flames to quickly remove the legs, since they seemed like they could be useful.

Giant Pincer Ant Legs (Grade B)

I checked myself while I was at it, and found I'd gone up to Level 43. I only had

500 LP left, so I considered heading back. Ultimately, I decided to stick close to the stairs for the next hour while the Dungeon Elevator skill recharged. That way, if things got too dangerous, I could use it in combination with Blinding Light to escape.

Once the hour was up, I set about exploring the floor again. I walked down the labyrinthine corridors for about three minutes before I heard some sort of rustling again. Something was just around the corner.

“Coo coo...”

“Hissss!”

An almost cute bird-like call was followed by a menacing cry. I peered around the corner to see a heated battle developing between a python and a toad. They were both even more massive than the ant, and they were glaring at each other with incredible animosity.

This floor is just a monster den, isn't it?

The python made the first move. It slithered quickly across the floor, opening its mouth wide to bare its fangs. It tried to bite the toad, but the toad swiftly hopped away until—

Fwump!

It smashed its head against the dungeon's ceiling and fell to the floor.

Well what did you think was going to happen!

The python casually coiled around the fallen toad. The outcome seemed like it was pretty much a foregone conclusion, but I was soon shocked by the true power disparity at play.

Name: Giant Python

Level: 50

Skills: Constrict

Name: Giant Toad

Level: 144

Skills: Venom

White liquid poured from the bumps on the toad's back as the python wrapped around it. Everywhere the liquid hit, the python's scales fizzed and hissed. That was a terrifyingly potent venom. Eventually, the snake's whole body split in two.

The toad seemed almost too strong. It had to be an exception to the rest of the floor's population. I mean, the ant from earlier was only Level 45. The toad had me completely outclassed. I was glad I wasn't up against it.

But then I heard even more footsteps from down the hall.

"Coo coo!"

The toad was very much on guard. I couldn't blame it; the sound of approach made all my hair stand on end too. My heart was in my throat as I wondered what it could be, but nothing could have prepared me for the truth: an inky black lion with a luxurious mane, taut muscled body, and long tail that swayed gently with a confident assuredness. The only parts of the creature that weren't a deep sooty black were its gleaming red eyes. The color wasn't the only thing that set it apart from normal lions. It was also massive, sure, but the weirdest part was definitely, definitely that weird-ass...*thing* right on top of its head.

"Guh! Guh!"

The toad, perhaps unable to contain its fear, struck at the lion preemptively. It shot out its tongue, which stuck to the creature's mane. Then it leapt forward, smashed its head into the ceiling, and landed on its back again. Same old trick as the last time, no doubt.

But the lion was no fool. With a single swipe of its claws, it put an end to the oversized amphibian. I was in shock. That toad was Level 144! But an even bigger surprise awaited me when I used my Discerning Eye on the lion.

Name: ???

Level: ???

Skills: ???

Not a single piece of information. Perhaps it had a skill that blocked Discerning Eye? Either way, I didn't have time to marvel. The lion had noticed me. It strode toward me with its kingly gait. It was impossibly intimidating, and what the hell was that *thing* on its head?! Why was it there?!

Running was my only option. So I used the combination my master had just taught me. Blinding Light flashed out of my hand.

<No, wait, human. I have someth—my eyes!>

I quickly deployed my Dungeon Elevator and leapt into the hole in front of me. I could finally catch my breath when I saw the door to the first level. Cold sweat coated my brow.

"Did that lion just talk?" I gasped to myself.

I could have sworn I heard a low rumbling voice say something. Could I have communicated with it? If the lion could talk, and didn't wish me harm, I definitely wanted to ask some questions. Starting with, for example: "Why the hell do you have a tulip growing out of your head?!"

I ran through town, just a *little* late to my appointment with that cleric, when I saw Emma standing in front of a familiar secondhand shop.

"You're so late, Noir! Over here!"

I was in a hurry, so I ran as fast as I could, but I was either going too fast or tired from my dungeon exploration earlier. My foot caught on a stone and I pitched forward.

Aaand I landed face-first in Emma's ample bosom.

"Eep!"

"Whoa! I'm sorry!" It probably would've been cool if I'd had the guts to say something like "Nice catch!" But, alas, I was too much of a coward. And I really

didn't want to get slapped.

"You really scared me there," Emma said.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to cop a feel, I just tripped."

"You don't need to apologize. Anyway, we need to hurry, we're late."

"Oh, right."



As I kept pace with Emma, a thought occurred to me. Was that an effect of the Lucky Lecher skill? It only took a second for me to get confirmation.

“Eeek!”

A gust of wind blew past, flipping up the skirt of the woman closest to me. The image of those titillating pink panties was seared into my retinas. I wasn’t very happy about it, though. Why? Because they belonged to none other than a wrinkly old woman. I felt nauseous. “Blegh.”

“So turned on, you can’t contain yourself?” the old woman cackled. “Here, I’ll give you another look.”

“Bleeeeeeeeeergh!”

This skill could use some serious work!

Chapter 22:

Luna, the Untainted Cleric

THOSE TWO VAGUELY EROTIC encounters must've done something, because my LP shot up to almost 1,000. I could understand how falling into Emma's boobs would do it, but had I even got LP from seeing that granny's panties? I wasn't really sure how to feel about that. Also, it seemed like the Lucky Lecher skill triggered pretty frequently, so I tried editing it while we were on our way to the meeting.

Lucky Lecher: Causes erotic situations to occur with nearby members of the opposite sex.

It just needed a little tweaking.

Add "rarely" — 10 LP

The LP cost was so low, I got curious and looked at what the opposite would cost.

Add "very frequently" — 1,000 LP

It made sense. Since these were considered "lucky" occurrences, increasing their frequency was considerably more valuable than the reverse. I went with the original plan and added "rarely" to the description. Even if the skill earned me LP, it'd become a reputation problem if something like that happened every time I met a woman. I added one more sentence to the description for good measure.

The cost wasn't an issue, so I added the phrase. I mean, getting a face full of boobs in the heat of battle could mean death. And for more serious situations, well, who wanted to be the creep with his head up someone's skirt in the middle of a funeral or something?

“Noir! Over there!”

Two figures stood conspicuously in front of a nearby restaurant. Lola was quite pretty to begin with, but the woman standing next to her was out-of-this-world gorgeous. The people passing by did a full triple-take when they saw her. She had silky silver hair and her face was made up of the most delicate features. Her skin was smooth and pale as the driven snow, her outfit highlighted her slender figure, she had some kind of magical firearm attached to her hip, and her ears were slightly pointed. There was no question that she had some elven blood in her. All in all, she was a total knockout.

Lola waved us over. “Mr. Noir, over here!”

“Sorry we're late.”

“Oh no, we just got here ourselves. This is my friend, Luna Heela.”



“Nice to meet you,” said Luna. “Lola has told me so much about you, Sir Noir. I have been looking forward to speaking with you.” She offered me her hand with a gentle smile.

I was so distracted by her beauty that it took me a second to respond. When I finally snapped out of it, I hurried to shake her hand and introduce myself. “Oh no, it’s my pleasure.”

“We have a reservation, so go on in.”

I looked Luna over as we walked in. Her legs were long and her butt was perky. The line of her back was—oh boy. Uh oh. Maybe I *was* a pervert.

“How am I supposed to compete with that? Genetics sure are cruel.” Emma seemed way depressed. Elves were well known for their to-die-for physique and unearthly beauty.

I figured I should try to cheer her up. “You have your own unique charms, Emma.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Like when your nice half comes out.”

“Other than that! Praise my appearance! Tell me what parts of me are better!”

“Your chest...”

“I thought you’d go there.”

“Okay, okay, then how about how nice you smell?”

“Oh, Noir, you’re such a perv.”

I couldn’t exactly deny that. I was pretty sure I heard someone once say that men took one step closer to pervert-dom with each year they aged. Then I remembered who said it! It was my own father. Great!

We all sat down at the back of the restaurant. Luna’s eyes were fixed intently on me.

“D-do I have something on my face?” I asked.

“No, you don’t. I just thought you looked kind of cute. I assumed you would be much rougher and more of a lech.”

“Lola! Just what have you been saying about me?”

“Just about how you made me lift up my skirt and flash you in the middle of the guild hall.” Lola’s face was bright red. She stuck her tongue out at me and winked.

Why would you tell her that?! I groaned.

“Lola’s no saint either,” said Luna. “She was just laughing and asking for advice on how to break you. Made me think twice about being friends with her.”

“Hey, Luna, why don’t we get down to business?” Lola looked genuinely terrifying, forcing a smile as a vein throbbed in her forehead.

I made a point to quickly order some food and change the subject. “We have a classmate with a really serious curse,” I explained. “And I heard you have a skill that can lift curses, Luna.”

“Mind if I ask this person’s name?”

“Maria. She’s a duke’s eldest daughter.”

“Thought so.” Luna’s expression darkened. She seemed familiar with Maria already. That didn’t bode well. Her tone grew serious as she continued. “So, a while ago, I got a job. Someone wanted me to lift a curse, but when I use my skills on extremely serious curses...”

“What happens?”

“Nothing, never mind that. Anyway, it was beyond my skills, so I had to turn it down.” Luna looked dejected. It was a cleric’s job to heal people and intercede with the gods for them, so it must’ve been really hard on her to admit this failure.

What a good person, I thought.

“How is she now?” Luna asked. “As I understand it, her curse causes her intense physical pain.”

“At this rate, she’s going to die soon,” I admitted.

“What?! Die?!”

“It’s called the Sixteenth Year Death Curse. Less than one percent of people survive it.”

“I didn’t realize it was that serious...” It seemed like Luna really hadn’t been told this was a life and death issue. Curse skills that caused death were actually pretty rare. Needless to say, Luna was shocked by the news. She had gone as pale as a ghost and couldn’t bring herself to touch her food. I took the opportunity to use Discerning Eye.

Name: Luna Heela

Age: 17

Species: Half-Elf

Level: 35

Occupation: Cleric; Adventurer Skills: Magical Firearms (Grade B); Energizing Shot; Healing Shot; Fainting Spell; Lift Curse

I was curious about the last two, but I started by looking into the Lift Curse skill.

Lift Curse: Erases curse skills. However, the user’s lifespan is reduced in proportion to the strength of the curse.

Oof. Well, that explained it. Luna could probably lift Maria’s curse, but it would severely shorten Luna’s life. Elves have long lifespans, but everything pointed to the Sixteenth Year Death Curse being a real doozy. To get rid of it, Luna’s sacrifice would be significant.

When we left the restaurant, Luna looked up at the crimson sky. Her lips tensed and she turned to look at me with a gallant expression. “Sir Noir, please take me to Maria. This time, I’m going to lift the curse.”

“Luna? I thought you couldn’t do it?” Judging from Lola’s reaction, Luna hadn’t explained the true cost of her skill. Or, if Lola did know about it, she was trying to protect her friend.

I asked to speak to Luna alone, so I could be frank. Emma and Lola gave us some space, even though they seemed like they were on the verge of a fight. They really didn’t get along very well.

“Did Lola tell you about my abilities?” I asked.

“Of course not. Receptionists are required to keep their clients’ information private. Lola’s not the kind of girl who would violate someone’s privacy.”

“All right, then. I admit I used Discerning Eye to look at your Lift Curse ability,” I said. “There’s a trade-off, isn’t there? What would happen if you saved Maria?”

“I...might die.” Luna looked away.

“And how many people would be sad if you were gone, Luna?”

“I’m not very important. Maybe seven thousand or so...”

“Seven tho—”

“Ha ha, I kid, I kid. I’m not that popular. But...I want to save her, even if it costs my life. I can’t just ignore someone in need. My mother never did.”

Luna explained that her mother had possessed Lift Curse as well, and it had the same parameters as Luna’s skill. One day, her mother used it to help a suffering child, even knowing it would drastically shorten her life. Though she was now gone, her daughter strove to carry on her legacy.

Crash!

A sudden loud noise came from behind me. I whirled. It looked like the sign for one of the nearby shops had toppled off the building.

“Someone was hit! Help! Does anyone here have healing magic?!”

The victim was a young boy. The sign had struck him as he walked by. He was now sprawled on the street, unconscious.

Luna drew her weapon from its holster and with a brave look on her face,

aimed at the boy. “Sometimes I wonder,” she said. “What is the meaning of life, anyway?”

“I still don’t have an answer to that one myself.”

“Well, that’s okay. I’m sure you’ll find it eventually.”

“Did you find your answer?” I asked.

“I did. Saving people and bringing smiles to their faces gives my life meaning. That’s why I’m alive—Healing Shot!” White light gathered at the head of her gun. Magical firearms used their user’s magic as projectiles. However, this white light wasn’t an offensive spell, but a healing one.

Click!

She pulled the trigger and a powerful boom rumbled through the street. A beam of white light about as big around as a person’s head shot out of her gun at incredible speed. It was instantly absorbed into the victim’s body and—
“Ngh...ugh...”

“Ohh! He woke up! Are you okay?!”

The boy, who likely would have died without intervention, miraculously recovered.

Fwump!

In the same moment, Luna collapsed.

“Luna?!” I knelt down to help her up.

“I don’t wanna...die...”

I couldn’t tell if she was mumbling, talking in her sleep, or just delirious. Was she talking about the cost of using Lift Curse? As I pulled her into my arms, I was shocked to see her eyes roll back into her head. She was foaming at the mouth and her body was convulsing. *What happened to that fearless hero from earlier?!*

“Curses...are scary...”

I have some serious doubts about this girl now!

Chapter 23:

Let's Throw Our Hats in the Ring!

WHEN LUNA PASSED OUT, I remembered that she had that Fainting Spell skill too. I looked into it with my Discerning Eye and, just as I thought, it made her prone to fainting spells. Apparently, they could be particularly bad if she used up all her magic or took a big hit.

“Luna, wake up!” Lola came running over and smacked Luna’s cheeks. It really seemed like she’d done this before. “She always does this. But don’t worry, she’ll wake up any second now.”

“Ugh...” Just like Lola said, in a moment Luna blinked a few times and then stood right up. “I seem to have made quite a fool of myself. Sir Noir, I would appreciate it if you forgot about that.”

But there was no way I could wipe that foaming face from my mind.

“Now,” said Luna. “Let us go to that poor little lamb. I have a duty to fulfill as a cleric.”

“But...”

“What’s the matter, Sir Noir? If you’re worried about me, I’m quite all right. You have nothing to fear!” She smacked her chest to demonstrate her heartiness, but I was more focused on her hips. They were trembling.

“Why don’t we try to come up with another way to lift the curse?” I suggested.

“What? Why?! We can save Maria with my Lift Curse skill! I can’t let someone die when I could save them!”

“But you’ve been shaking this whole time.”

“I-I, uh...I’m just quaking with excitement!”

“And I definitely heard you mumbling earlier about how scary curses are.”

“What? No way. I said that?”

“You did. Look, just stop lying and be real with me. You’re scared, aren’t you?”

When Luna fell silent, Lola bonked her on the head, pretending to be mad and insisting she spill the beans.

Tears streamed down Luna’s face. “All right! I’m scared. I mean, if I save Lady Maria, I might die. Just the thought of it makes my legs feel like jelly. I’m so ashamed I feel this way.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” I told her. “Nobody wants to die. You know what my father said? He said he’d dance naked if it’d save her.”

“I’m not sure what good that’d do.”

“Anyway, you should stop using your Lift Curse skill for now.”

“But if I do that—”

“Don’t worry, I have an idea.”

To be honest, the situation wasn’t really that dire. If anything, things were looking up. I’d already taken the opportunity to look into editing her Lift Curse skill.

Delete “the user’s lifespan is reduced in proportion to the strength of the curse” — 10,000 LP

Unsurprisingly, completely removing the trade-off was really expensive. It would have been cheaper to just directly edit Maria’s curse skill to remove it. So, I changed strategies.

“Lifespan” changed to “finances” — 4,000 LP

That option would require less than half the effort. I explained my plan to Luna.

“So,” I said. “What if I made it so that using the skill only reduced your finances, not your life?”

“That would be so much better!”

“The one problem is that I still don’t have enough LP to do it.” I’d die if I used up all my LP, so I’d need more like 4,500. I already had 1,300 so I just needed to make up the remaining 3,200. “I can earn LP through erotically charged activity or eating delicious food, among other things. I get it when I feel accomplished from completing a task too.”

I did earn some from passing the test for the Hero Academy, after all.

“Can you think of any way I could quickly fill up my tank, so to speak?” I asked Lola. She was a receptionist, so she had to know all sorts of things.

“That’s a good question. Well, there’s an upcoming event that might do it.”

“Really?!”

“The harem pride event that the nobles hold every week.”

As surprised as I was, I kept listening. I mean, I knew that bigamy was common with particularly influential people, and that highly skilled adventurers often took multiple lovers, but I’d never heard of anyone having a straight-up harem. I guess people with lots of wives and lovers wanted to show them off.

“But it’s an event for showing off your harem, right?” I asked. “I mean, good for the people who have them, but it seems pretty insufferable if you’re on the other end of that.”

I mean, what would they do? Gather around just to watch? But apparently, I was totally wrong about how people felt.

“I’m told they gather quite a crowd every time,” said Lola. “Some people just want to see attractive folks, though apparently some go just to heckle.”

“Wow.”

“I hear they score the harems too. That’s why you shouldn’t go to watch, you should participate.”

I wasn’t so sure about the idea though. On one hand, I was pretty confident I

could fulfill my ambition to win the competition and get some prize money, and the interaction I'd likely have with these three women would make it easy to earn LP. But, on the other hand, I really didn't want to get lectured by random onlookers. Or rather, I didn't mind if they bad-mouthed *me*, but I couldn't stand the idea of Emma and the others being slandered.

"I'm not so..." I started.

"Let's do it!"

"Yeah, I'm in too."

That was a surprise. Emma and Luna were both into the idea.

"Are you sure?" Lola asked. "You might make people jealous and get all sorts of awful comments."

"But it might help Noir earn the LP he needs," Emma replied. "I can deal with it."

"Yeah, me too," said Luna. "I think my upbringing probably trained me to handle heckling pretty well. I'll just think of it as another test of my willpower."

"I'll participate too," said Lola. "I *am* Noir's managing receptionist after all."

And so, thanks to this trio of tough ladies, we decided to participate in the event. They even agreed to act like we were dating in the interim. The event was held every week on Sunday, which just so happened to be tomorrow, so we decided to split up for the day. When I got home, Alice and my mother let me rest my head in their laps and I earned a little LP that way.

"It's not fair. Why does Noir get all the attention? Let me use your lap as a pillow."

My father spent the evening glaring at me, green with envy, and my mother and Alice impressed me with their talent for ignoring him.

On the day of the event, I headed there together with my comrades. A stage had been constructed in the park for the participants to stand on and extol the virtues of their women. There were to be two rounds of judging. The first involved a simple introduction, where the judge was the noble sponsoring the event. Each girl was scored individually, with the highest possible individual

score being 1,000 points. The best three teams then moved on to the second round of judging.

As an aside, while it was described as a “harem” event, it was entirely within the rules to enter a single romantic partner. Admittedly, that would put you at a significant disadvantage, since you’d only have one person’s score to work with. The upper limit was five.

“We’ve only got three, so we’re at a bit of a disadvantage.”

“What should we do? Though, last time a man with two girls won.”

Huh, I guess quality counts for something.

All that aside, I was impressed with the level of enthusiasm at the venue. Guests were already streaming in. There had to be over a thousand of them. We went to the counter and let them know we’d be participating. There were ten teams signed up, and our group was last on the roster. The plump, middle-aged nobleman who was sponsoring the event opened by greeting the audience and pumping them up for the festivities.

“Well, this time around we have ten very lucky lads participating. They’re gonna come up here, brag about their girls, and win a million rels for it! What absolute bastards, am I right?!”

“Off with their heads!”

“Feel free to take this as an opportunity to blow off some steam!”

“Hell yeaaaaah!”

I was hit with a sudden burning desire to go home. Then Lola gave me a little insider information that just made it worse.

“So, that nobleman up there, he’s been betrayed by women more than a few times in the past. The majority of the men gathered here seem to have had similarly negative experiences with women, or don’t have girlfriends.”

“Wait, so does that mean...”

“It’s going to be an especially fierce battle.”

Lola struck a fighting pose. She had thick skin. Maybe too thick. This thing

seemed a lot less about showing off and more about being a target for abuse.

I really wanna go home.

Chapter 24:

Now That's What I Call a Harem

THE HAREM PRIDE EVENT. The very name summons images of popular men strutting about, showing off their dazzling girlfriends, and inviting the jealousy of the crowd. You'd be right about the jealousy part, but it was rapidly becoming apparent that this might not be...fun.

"Now, the first team will take the stage!"

The nobleman running the event, Mr. Pepperero, acted as judge and master of ceremonies. It was a weekly event, so he was clearly in his element.

"Take a good look at the women I love!" a man declared.

A man and three women confidently took the stage. They were all pretty young. In terms of visuals...I wasn't quite sure what to say. Honestly, I didn't find any of the women to be precisely my type, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Deafening silence fell over the crowd.

"Please have each member of your harem step forward one at a time and give us a little twirl," Mr. Pepperero called.

A black-haired woman was first. She sashayed from one end of the stage to the other and smiled for the audience. The proud look on the face of her romantic partner really left an impression.

"My name is Mira, and I work as a waitress."

That's when it all turned sour. The audience went berserk, almost like a dam had burst. The silence earlier had been the calm before the storm.

"Look at that ugly cow! She's so ugly I think I'm gonna puke! Someone help!"

"That nose, ha! Do something about that pig nose of yours!"

"Her hair's nice, but everything else is filthy. Hilarious! I bet she makes the food taste disgusting too!"

A torrent of insults rushed at her from all sides. Indecent laughter and rotten bread flew through the air.

“Ngh...” Mira looked like she was about to cry. She probably didn’t expect it to be this bad.

Honestly, she wasn’t remotely ugly. I dunno if I’d call her stunning, but her presence wasn’t about to ruin anyone’s meal. The remaining members of the harem were on about the same level. As you might expect, they were met with much the same horrific reaction. Naturally, their man couldn’t remain silent in the face of such abuse.

“Shut the hell up, all of you! You ever think this is why you can’t get girlfriends?”

“Who needs women! I’d rather trot some literal dogs up on stage than those sorry excuses.”

“Get out! Get out! Get out!”

Once the crowd started chanting for them to leave, Mr. Pepperero raised his hand for silence.

“I haven’t cast my judgement yet. From right to left: 30 points, 26 points, 20 points, for a total of 76!”

Surely that was a little too low. The first team left the stage nearly in tears. Emma and I caught each other’s eye. We were thinking the same thing: it might be time to give up.

“This place is crueler than the wild,” I said.

“Ugh,” said Emma. “I wanna go home...”

“Fine by me,” said Lola. “Go home. Mr. Noir still has me to rely on.”

“Wha—I’m not going home! A few insults aren’t going to rattle me!”

Emma’s fighting spirit flared thanks to Lola’s expert provocation. But in my book, it’d still be best to make a quick exit, if this got any worse. No one needed to be permanently traumatized by this awful treatment.

To my dismay, the abuse continued as the second and third groups took the stage. And, just as with the first, their combined score didn’t even make it to three digits.

“Oho, look at that beauty.”

One of the members of the fourth group was knock-out gorgeous. Would the audience still be able to shower her with insults?

“I work at the secondhand shop. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She had a dignified air about her and, as far as I could tell, she wasn’t trying to curry favor. The audience, as always, were silent for a time until one person opened his mouth.

“She’s kinda flat-chested, isn’t she?”

“I thought so too. Flat as a board.”

“Flat as a board! Flat as a board! Flat as a board!”

“Shut your damn mouths!” she snapped at them.

For a moment, they stopped their rude chant. Despite all that, she got the highest score so far: 760 points! The remaining members of her team got 100 points each, so the disparity was pretty extreme. To Mr. Peppero’s credit, he may have been stingy with the points so far, but he seemed to recognize exceptional contestants. If he didn’t, I guess there’d be nothing to this event but bullying.

The ninth team was the harem of a famous adventurer from Odin’s rival guild, Lahmu. All four of the women he brought with him were a cut above the rest and scored over 800 each, putting his total score close to 3,300.

My stomach sank. “There’s no way we’re gonna win, is there? I mean, just mathematically.”

“Don’t worry, we just have to score in the top three in the first round. Currently, second place has 960 points and third has 800, so we just have to score 801.”

“Oof. Got it. I guess we’re up.”

We braced ourselves for the worst and ascended to the stage. I had the least to do, but I was so nervous I couldn’t stand it. I was sweating bullets, wishing I could do something to spare the girls the brutality of the crowd.

Emma was up first. She must've been at least as anxious as I was—she was shaking.

“Just be yourself, Emma,” I told her, trying to be supportive, if I could do nothing else. “Don't worry, I'm here for you.”

She gave me a tight little smile. “Thanks, Noir. That makes me feel a lot better.”

I gave her a gentle push and Emma raised her head. Before I knew it, she was sweeping across the stage, full of confidence. Her chest bounced with every step.

“I'm Emma, and I'm currently attending the Hero Academy.”

The audience fell silent. Everyone seemed more focused on gazing at Emma than opening their mouths.

“Damn...that face, and her chest...just, damn...”

“If she's in the Hero Academy, she must be a member of the elite.”

Somehow, Emma got off scot-free. She turned the spotlight over to Luna without getting much if any abuse.

“I'm Luna. I'm a cleric and adventurer. If you tell me someone's injured, my Healing Shot will extinguish their pain!”

“She's got a killer bod... How are her limbs so slender...?”

“And she's a half-elf cleric on top of it all.”

“Isn't that the great Luna? I didn't know she had a boyfriend.”

It felt like the temperature of the venue was dropping by the minute. Last up was Lola. She started her walk with a friendly smile on her face.

“Hello, everybody! I'm a receptionist for Odin. If any of you here are planning on living the adventuring life, come give us a visit!”

“Even she's cute! How'd he manage this?”

“And she's brave to use this as an opportunity to promote her business...”

Not only were all three of the ladies I'd come with beautiful, they had no

visible flaws. They had pretty faces, attractive bodies, and nice voices to boot. Not even this antisocial audience could find anything to attack, which was a real relief.

“Hm, this might be a harem for the history books,” Mr. Pepperero muttered.

In the end, he gave them all scores over 950, giving us a total of 2,900 and securing us a tidy second place. Emma and the other girls high-fived to celebrate.

“We did it!”

“Ugh, I’m sorry I didn’t do anything!” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. Plus, the real fight is about to start.”

“Yeah, let’s give it our best shot.”

The top three teams took the stage again, and the second round began almost immediately.

“I’ll be giving you questions,” said Mr. Pepperero. “The harem members will have to respond. Whichever team makes the audience the most jealous, wins.”

First up was the team with the pretty girl who the audience declared flat-chested.

“Here we go. I have three questions for you: One, show me what you would do if your man was shivering in his bed at night. Two, what if he caught a cold? And three, how would you prove your harem is the best harem?”

Those situations sound a touch specific! I wasn’t sure how best to respond to Mr. Pepperero’s questions. I guess, fundamentally, they were all about demonstrating how much the girls loved their man. That would likely be the deciding factor.

“You two, come here.” Lola called Emma and Luna over to strategize. They didn’t want to tell me their plans. I think they wanted to make sure my reactions were genuine.

The girls in the first team went first. They started by demonstrating how they’d ward off the cold with steamy hot kisses, then feeding their guy bread mouth-to-mouth if he were sick. The audience looked devastated. Curiously,

none of them left. They might not have wanted to watch, but they couldn't take their eyes off the stage.

Next up, the Lahmu adventurer's group received much the same reaction. At the end of their turn, each girl got up and declared their love for their man. This made the audience and Mr. Pepperero clutch their chests in pain.

Finally, it was our turn. I still had no idea what the girls were planning but, assuming I was supposed to pretend to be in bed, I took a seat.

"First, why don't you show us what you would do if your main man was cold?" Mr. Pepperero said.

Emma, Lola, and Luna cutely scurried over to me with smiles on their faces.

"Are you cold? Don't worry, we'll warm you up."

"There you go, now you won't be cold anymore."

Their voices were gentle, almost like they were speaking to a child, as the three of them embraced me together...and then started moving their bodies up and down to generate friction.

"Ngh, I hate them...why do they get to be so happy...?"

"Damn, if three babes did that to me in bed on a chilly night, I could die happy."

The audience was suffering and Mr. Pepperero's breathing was getting ragged.

"I-I've seen enough! Next! Move onto the next situation! How would you treat him if he caught a cold!"

Mr. Pepperero tossed the piece of bread over to us. Lola gently laid me down in her lap and looked down at me with a heavenly smile as Emma began to give me a full-body massage.

"You're always working so hard, you should take it easy when you're sick," she said with an adorable smile.

While I was enjoying the massage, Luna tore off a bite-size piece of bread and blew on it. "Sir Noir, say 'aah.'"

Though I was a little confused, I happily accepted the bread.

“It’s just bread! It’s not even hot, but she blew on it for him?! Damn them!”

“I wish someone would treat me that nicely when I was sick.”

A miserable aura enveloped the entire crowd.

“Me too...I wish my wife and daughter had treated me like this...ngh, next! Hurry up and get to the last section!” Mr. Pepperero shouted.

Lola, Emma, and Luna all helped me up. Emma stood directly across from me with Lola to her right and Luna to her left. I didn’t know what to expect, but then the three of them started all at once.

“One, two, three!”

The three of them all gave me a kiss at the same time, and I froze. The audience reacted before I did.

“I hate it! My heart’s going to tear in two!”

“Mr. Pepperero, please! We’re begging you! Put us out of our misery!”

“I...I can see my wife and daughter’s faces...ngh waaaaaah! Stop it already! Don’t make me remember what I’ve lost!” Mr. Pepperero seemed the most affected of all.

Though the last few minutes had admittedly been pretty great, I was still eager to leave this place. I slid over to Mr. Pepperero while he was still convulsing. “Um, excuse me, but could you tell us the results?”

“Fine, you win, just leave and never come back!”

“Seriously! You’re going to traumatize us!”

And on that note, we took the million rel prize and hurried out of the venue.

1,300 LP → 3,700 LP

It didn’t get me all the way there in one shot like we’d hoped, but it was a huge leap. And I didn’t even do anything.

Chapter 25:

Shoulder Massage

ON MONDAY MORNING, I changed into my school uniform and headed down into the living room. To my surprise, Emma was waiting at the dining table.

“Morning,” she said.

“Good morning. So, you came to pick me up, huh?”

“Yeah. And I brought some extras for breakfast too.”

Way to understate. Our breakfast table, which was usually rather sparse, was overflowing. We had everything from meat to salad, eggs, and even corn. Corn wasn’t grown much in this region, so most of it was imported and carried a hefty price tag, but there were four whole cobs on the table. There would have been five, but one of them had already been devoured. Given how sloppily it was consumed, this was no doubt my father’s doing.

“.....”

Father, mother, and Alice were all silently hiding their eyes behind their hands.

“You don’t have anything to cry about, guys,” I told them.

“Yeah, Mr. Stardia. These are just leftovers.”

Despite our reassurances, my father kept crying.

“Noir...you’re such a lucky man. There are people in this world who never had a childhood friend like Emma, no matter how badly they wanted one. And especially not one so cute and kind.”

“I know, I know, I’m very grateful,” I said quietly. “But if you keep on crying, you’re going to make it obvious that we don’t normally have this much to eat.”

“Yes, but...but I haven’t had corn in ten years. I can’t hold back anymore. So I’m taking yours too!”

My father’s hand was smacked away from three separate directions, and he dropped the corn back on the plate.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Mr. Stardia,” said Emma.

“You disappoint me again, dear,” my mother told him. “This is the seventh time this month.”

“Father,” said Alice. “Behave yourself. If you want it that badly, you should use your own money.”

“Ugh, you don’t have to be so mean to me...”

I sat down and gobbled up the whole corncob right in front of him.

“You couldn’t have shared...?”

“Father,” I said. “I need you to tell me where Duke Albert’s house is. This is important.”

My father’s work involved taking tourists around the town and entertaining people, so he knew his way around. He sniffled. “But you didn’t give me your corn...”

“I’ll give you something better than corn.”

“Ah, well. I’ll take your word for it, my dear son.”

My father wrote down Maria’s address and drew me a map. I could have just asked the Great Sage, but that wasn’t completely risk free, and I wanted to avoid relying on it. I planned to pay Luna a visit, then drop by to see Maria when I had enough LP.

As a thank you for the map, I dropped 1.3 million rels onto the table. This was followed by a series of loud crashes as my family fell from their chairs.

“N-N-N-Noir! What is the meaning of this?!” my father cried.

“I earned over 2.5 million over the last few days. I’m giving you half, so use it to shore up the family finances, okay?”

“With pleasure! Ha ha!”

I was a little worried about handing over that much money to my father, but I figured it’d be fine with my mother and Alice to keep him in check. With that taken care of, Emma and I took our leave to head for school.

“I love how cheery and fun your family always is,” she said.

“We may be poor, but we’re happy. They’re the reason I’m the person I am today.”

Though I suppose I couldn’t really make any claims about my upbringing being particularly proper.

As we made our way down the hall at school, Emma stopped suddenly. “Hey, isn’t that Maria doubled over there?!”

“We have to help her.”

Maria was crouched down in a stairwell, clutching her chest. Her breathing was harsh and tight.

“Are you okay? I can take you to the nurse,” I said.

“I-I am quite all right. I always have attacks like this.” She stumbled a bit as she stood up, her face still pale as a sheet. Apparently, Amare was out for the day. After a few more moments, Maria caught her breath. “Mr. Noir, Miss Emma, I am so terribly sorry. I am always causing you two trouble.”

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I couldn’t leave this girl suffering without any hope of recovery. “It’s really because of your curse skill,” I said. “Isn’t it?”

“How do you...?”

She stood there, astonished, as I explained the basics of my abilities. My Discerning Eye, the LP stuff, and even about our plan with Luna. Of course, I left out the bit about my hidden dungeon.

“So basically,” I said. “I might be able to use my skills to lift your curse.”

“But won’t that lower your LP? You could die if you use it all.”

“And that’s why I’ve spent the past few days collecting as much LP as possible. I’m almost there.”

“But...why? Why are you going to such lengths to help me?”

I paused. I was actually a little stumped. We had barely even met and weren’t particularly close. So why did I want to help Maria so badly? Because she was a good person? How cliché! If I said that out loud, it would probably ring hollow. So instead I said, “Because we’re going to be spending a lot of time together as

classmates.”

“Are you sure it’s not just because she’s pretty?” Emma needled.

“Well, I can’t exactly say that wasn’t a factor.”

I had intended that as a joke, but Emma glared daggers. However, that was the least of my worries, because Maria suddenly burst into tears.

“It’ll be okay, Lady Maria,” Emma said, instantly switching gears to comfort her. “I just know Noir will figure this out.”

To no surprise, this whole curse business had clearly been weighing on Maria. Her show of vulnerability just made me that much more determined to lift her curse.

Once she finally calmed down, I bowed my head. I’d had an idea, though it still seemed a little forward. I wanted to be as respectful as possible. “I do have one request though. If it’s not asking for too much, could you give me a kiss on the cheek?”

When I explained that it was to earn LP, Maria readily agreed. She moved next to me, but she was still a little shaky and couldn’t stand still. If I remembered correctly, she also didn’t have a lot of experience with men—although, admittedly, I was pretty nervous myself.

“Sorry for asking you to do something weird like this,” I mumbled. “You don’t have to force yourself.”

“N-no, I will do it. Pardon me.”

Maria delicately placed her lips on my cheek, and I got both a pleasant tickly feeling and some LP. I promised to stop by her house after class because, at the rate things were going, I thought I’d have enough before the day was over. I only needed another 500 LP to get to my target. During lunch break, I was pondering asking Emma, Luna, and Lola to help me boost my reserves when my homeroom teacher, Ms. Elena, called me over.

“I need your help carrying books.”

In the midst of fulfilling her request, I suddenly thought to ask: “Aren’t there students around who are stronger than me?”

“Yeah?”

“So, does that mean I’m just easier to get along with?”

“Ah ha ha, you might be right. You do remind me of a dog I once had.”

“So, I’m a pet to you?”

I plunked the pile of books down on her desk, and she gave me a piece of candy as a reward. I put it in my mouth, grumbling about being treated like a little kid.

“Aw, man, I’ve been so stiff lately.” Ms. Elena took a seat and thumped her shoulders with her fist.

“Got some knots that need working out?”

“Yeah, I’ve had issues ever since I was a mercenary. I guess I’m just prone to muscle cramps.”

Thankfully I was not, so I couldn’t exactly relate.

“Oh, if only there was a gentleman who could help work out the knots.”

This must have been the real reason she got me to come around. But then, this was also just the kind of opportunity I needed right now, wasn’t it?

“There might be a gentleman like that,” I said. “But he has one condition.”

“Spill it.”

“I want you to sit on me again.”

“D-did I convert you?”

“No comment. But...I would appreciate your cooperation.”

“Not so fast! I’ll make it even more perverse this time, but I have conditions of my own.”

“Which are?” I asked.

“You must satisfy me with your shoulder massage. If you do, I’ll give you special treatment. We can stop any time if you can’t handle it. Got it?”

I agreed and laid my hands on her shoulders. They really were stiff! I was actually a little worried about her circulation getting cut off.

“Hurry up and get on with it.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

I came at it from all sorts of angles, but nothing seemed to work. From her disinterested yawns, she didn’t seem like she was particularly enjoying it either. Then she started talking like I’d already failed.

“Yeah, enough already. This is too big a job for an amateur. You can go back to your lunch.”

Frustrated, I decided to Get Creative.

Shoulder Rub — 80 LP

Considering the reward on the line, the LP expenditure would be worth it. With my new skill in hand, I went at her shoulders again.

“Look, just give up already, it’s not goin—hnngh?! ”

She twitched and sat straight up. It looked like the skill was doing its job. I figured she’d get bored if I just kept doing the same thing, so every so often I changed up the technique, speed, and pressure.

“Haaa ngh ahh...how are you...so good...?”

“How’s this?”

“Huh?! Incredible, of course!”

“Is this the spot? Does this feel good?”

“Yes! Yes, that’s the spot!” She spasmed and flopped over on her desk. Her shoulders felt much softer and more relaxed, and I was glad to be of service.

Chapter 26:

Salvation

I WAS NOT A normal person. I had known that for as long as I could remember. I was subject to terrible bouts of unbearable pain that took over my whole body—sometimes they felt like an electric jolt, and sometimes they were more of a dull, throbbing ache that lasted forever. But the pain I hated the most was when it felt like my heart was being crushed. It became hard to breathe, and tears always spilled from my eyes. My symptoms were strange and physically undiagnosable. It wasn't until I had my skills appraised as a child that the cause became apparent—the Sixteenth Year Death Curse.

“Maria, Daddy promises he'll find a way to cure you.”

Despite all my suffering, I was blessed with a wonderful family and, as the daughter of a duke, was afforded every comfort and kindness. Many people worked tirelessly to lift my curse and, in the course of their research, the cause was discovered. Over two hundred years ago, one of my ancestors defeated a sorcerer and was cursed to have their descendants suffer. Curiously, both my father and elder brother were fine. Only I bore the burden of suffering.

On the eve of my sixteenth birthday, I crept downstairs and heard my parents and brother talking about me.

“But there's no more time...”

“Ah, I would trade places with her if I could!”

“L-Let's search overseas to find someone, anyone who could help.”

Their distress was just one further stab to my heart. I only had a year left to live. My family even reached out to the royal family to collect a number of experts, but not a single one of them could lift my curse.

“Why me? I don't want to die...”

I was so scared to turn sixteen that I cried until the sun came up. But it also gave me the confidence to make a decision.

“I want to take the Hero Academy entrance exam,” I announced over

breakfast, much to the shock of my family.

They thought I should focus on treatment but, this once, I wouldn't back down.

"If my ailment is cured, it would be most inappropriate for me to remain unemployed. So, I am going to the Hero Academy, and I will find a cure for myself."

My family respected my decision but, in reality, they had probably given up hope. In a way, I had to. I couldn't run from the curse. If I was going to die, I wanted to spend what time I had left living my life to the fullest!

My dear friend Amane expressed a similar desire to attend the academy, so we took the exam together. There, we were surprised to witness two things. Firstly, a team who achieved an incredibly high score in the first round, comprised of Mr. Noir, Miss Emma, and Lady Lenore. And secondly, the very same Mr. Noir, who fired a Stone Bullet that was much smaller than normal.

Though I had been cursed, I had received a superb education. One of my tutors had been especially learned in the field of magic. They told me: "Stone Bullet isn't very commonly used because it always generates the same size projectile, no matter who uses it. And it doesn't inflict very much damage."

"I see."

"Although, two hundred years ago, there was an adventurer named Olivia who somehow had the ability to fire anything from boulders to pebbles."

"How did she manage that?"

"She had learned a skill called Editor."

"Then perhaps she has descendants..."

"She disappeared before she ever married."

"Oh..."

At the time, I thought that perhaps if a skill could be edited, then my curse might be lifted. That tiny ray of hope was immediately dashed. It was hopeless. Or at least, that's what I thought until I saw Mr. Noir at the entrance exam. It rekindled a faint hope in my heart—could he have the Editor skill? With the

score he achieved in the first round, he had to be special.

I had to talk to him, but it would be quite rude of me to address him out of the blue, so I held my tongue. However, luck was on my side. Only a few days later, I happened upon Mr. Noir and Miss Emma. I felt a bit remiss interrupting them in what appeared to be an intimate moment, but I steeled my heart and was finally able to speak to him—though ultimately, my courage failed me, and I could not ask.

I yet intended to eventually inquire about the Editor skill, but for the following few days I was battling excruciating pain. I could barely take food and simply walking made my chest ache. Nonetheless, I returned to class in the hope of finding another opportunity to ask Mr. Noir about his skills.

“Haah, haah, it hurts...so much...”

I couldn’t even leave the stairwell. For all I knew, this day might be my last. I was so scared. I felt like crying. But then, almost as if the gods had smiled on me, Mr. Noir and Miss Emma came down the hall. And that wasn’t the end to the good news.

“Mr. Noir, Miss Emma, I am so terribly sorry. I am always causing you two trouble.”

“It’s really because of your curse skill, isn’t it?”

“How do you...?”

Somehow, Mr. Noir already knew everything, before I even said a word. He knew what kind of curse it was, he knew its effects, and he was planning to expend his own life force to free me. We had only met but a few times, but he wanted to help me. No words could express my gratitude.

Mr. Noir said he would be by after class, so I erred on the side of caution and returned home. I lay in bed and closed my eyes, my heart still aching. But I wasn’t sure if this pain was caused by the curse.

I just couldn’t sit still. Despite the pain in my chest, I went down into the living room and gazed out the window.

“My Lady, are you waiting for someone?” asked our family butler.

He had looked after me since I was very young, and I felt comfortable confiding in him.

“Yes, one of my classmates will be calling upon me soon.”

“Is this classmate a boy?”

“Yes, he is. How did you know?”

“You really are getting to be that age. It warms this old fool’s heart to know that the young mistress will have a sweetheart before she passes.”

“Sweetheart?! I-I think you’ve gotten the wrong idea. We are mere friends.”

“Is that so? You have such a look of yearning on your—oh, goodness, a guest. Excuse me, my lady.”

He left, and shortly afterwards brought a boy and a girl back with him—Mr. Noir and a beautiful half-elf. Her name was Luna, and I had met her once before. She was among the people my family sought out to lift my curse. She was a very talented cleric, but she had still been unable to help me.

“Mr. Noir? And you are...?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Noir. “I believe you’ve actually met before. She’s the person who’s going to lift your curse.”

“My name’s Luna. I’m sorry I failed before. When Sir Noir told me that your curse was going to kill you, I realized what a mistake I’d made. I hope you’ll let me help this time.”

The first time we met, she struck me as a very polite and courteous girl. It was clear why people put so much trust in her.

“You must’ve had a reason for turning me down.”

“I did. My Lift Curse skill comes at a price. The stronger the curse, the more of my lifespan it takes away to lift it.”

“Goodness! I never thought—” I shook my head. I could never ask anyone to do such a thing. Luna was a cleric, and many people needed her services. I couldn’t live with myself if she gave up her life.

But Mr. Noir smiled at me warmly. “Don’t worry. I can use my Editor skill to change the cost.”

“Exactly, Lady Maria. It won’t be a problem. Now let’s get you healed. Close your eyes.”

“V-very well.”

I did as I was asked. I could feel her touch my chest, and a gentle warmth flooded into my body.

“That should do it. It doesn’t hurt anymore, does it?”

I hadn’t noticed it until she asked, but I did feel much better. It was hard to believe that the pain had ever been there.

“It worked. The Sixteenth Year Death Curse is gone,” Mr. Noir announced.

Luna pulled me into her arms. “It must have been so hard, bearing that all alone for so long. But you’re going to be fine now.”

I still didn’t quite believe it.

“That curse won’t hurt you anymore, Lady Maria,” Mr. Noir said. “You can rest easy.”

When I saw the gentle smile on his face, I finally believed it.

“I...I...”

I wanted to thank them, but I couldn’t seem to form the words. I couldn’t even remember when I last cried so much. It might have been the first time in my life.

Even though the curse was gone, my chest hurt again. But it wasn’t a bad hurt. It was the profound ache of gratitude.

Chapter 27:

Epilogue

AFTER I SATISFIED Ms. Elena with my shoulder rub, she sat on me again, but with a special twist this time. Even if teacher-student relationships weren't strictly forbidden at the Academy, we realized we were crossing a lot of lines, so we headed into a different room to avoid prying eyes.

Ms. Elena dominated my entire body with her ass, alternately grinding and gently pressing. Her "massage" went on for several minutes, and when she was done I had over 4,500 LP.

"Thanks, Ms. Elena."

"Keep this between us. I might have to ask you to rub my shoulders again."

"Happily."

"Heh."

"Heh."

We exchanged smiles. We both saw each other as a convenient device to get what we wanted. I was her massage machine and she was my LP-recharge device. It was a decidedly adult relationship, that started out light and gradually got more thrilling...

"You smell like danger, Ms. Elena."

"All right, enough nonsense. Get back to class."

She pushed me out of the room with her ass and, having finally returned to my senses, I headed back to the classroom.

After school, Emma and I went to visit Luna. She was in the middle of her work at the temple.

"Lady Cleric, I feel unwell."

There were other clerics offering medical care, but Luna was the only one with a long line. The first thing she did was examine her patients' faces.

"I see you have bags under your eyes. Are you sure you're not overworking

yourself?”

“Work’s been stressful lately, and I’ve been having a hard time sleeping.”

“People need rest, so you should try not to push yourself too hard. Healing Shot!”

She fired a white orb of light from her magical gun and the man visibly improved.

“Thank you, Lady Cleric!”

“Make sure you don’t push yourself too hard. Come back if you start feeling bad.”

Though Luna was still only seventeen, she had no trouble handling adults and even winning their respect. While I admired her, Emma asked a foreboding question: “Hey, you don’t think she’s going to faint again, do you?”

“I think she’s keeping her magic usage in check.”

“So, it only happens when she fires an especially powerful shot?”

“I think so. Plus, she’s got enough experience to put her over Level 30. I don’t think there’s much to worry about.”

I assumed she should be fine as long as she didn’t use a full-power Healing Shot again, but that just goes to show that when you assume things, you make an ass out of—well, mostly just me in this case. Just as I was feeling at ease, Luna collapsed.

What?! I just said there wasn’t anything to worry about and you collapse?!

“Hey! Lady Luna fainted again. Hurry it up.”

Some of the other clerics rushed over and started to treat her. They had her up in no time.

“Ahhh, I-I’m fine...” she said.

The whole ordeal seemed pretty painful to me, but Luna continued her work even afterward. According to the other clerics, she keeled over at least two or three times a day.

“Well, of course that happens. There are just too many patients,” Emma

pointed out.

“Seriously. It must be hard for her since she’s shouldering most of the work.”

Once Luna had worked through her entire line, we went over to her.

“Nice work,” I said. “You must be exhausted.”

She winced. “You saw me embarrass myself again...”

“Oh no, don’t feel embarrassed—I think your dedication to the job is incredible.”

Luna glanced away, as if she didn’t want me to see her face. “By the way, Sir Noir, how are you doing for LP?”

“Actually, I have even more than the amount required now, so if you don’t mind, I’ll go ahead and Edit your skill.”

With that, I adjusted the cost of Luna’s Lift Curse skill—changing it from reducing her lifespan to reducing her finances. It cost me 4,000 LP. If I’d gone for personal effects instead of finances, the cost would have dropped to 3,500, but I figured money made more sense. After all, “personal effects” could encompass really critical things like family heirlooms or her weapon.

I looked at her Fainting Spell skill while I was at it, to see if there was anything I could do to fix it, but removing it would have cost another 3,000 LP. Luna was probably pretty used to it, but I still wanted to cure her someday.

After this, the three of us headed to Maria’s house. When we got to the front door, Emma said she wasn’t coming in with us.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’ll wait outside. I wouldn’t want to distract you.”

“All right.”

On that note, the butler showed Luna and I into the Albert residence, where Luna swiftly lifted Maria’s curse, leaving no trace that it ever existed.

“How’d it go?” Emma asked as we left.

I flashed her a thumbs up and she clapped her hands for joy before whispering to Luna. “So...in love...Lady Maria?”

“I don’t...look... I’m sure Sir Noir...infatuated with...”

“Ugh... More...rivals to...”

“Actually, I...maybe...”

“Huh?!” Emma made a terribly unladylike face and Luna squirmed bashfully.

I was dying to know what they were talking about. I slithered over to them but, for some reason, Emma got mad at me.

“Noir, you big, stupid dummy!”

“Huh? What did I do now?”

“Ugh, I’ve always known you were useless. You’re such a softy.”

“You used to say that was a good thing.”

“Only when you’re nice to boys!”

“I feel like people are going to take that the wrong way.”

“Now, now, you two,” said Luna. “This is a happy day, no need to fight.”

“Hmmp!” Emma didn’t seem to agree, but her mood quickly improved and she suggested we have dinner together at my house.

“Of course, Luna’s invited too,” she said.

“I’d be happy to,” said Luna. “Assuming I’m not intruding.”

“My house might be a little too small to welcome a great cleric,” I said.

“Sir Noir,” said Luna. “Did you know I was also an adventurer with Odin?”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I did,” I said. Lola had told me so, though I was a little surprised by the change in subject.

“Well, um, s-so, about that...” Luna’s face grew a bit flushed and she started to squirm. She seemed more nervous than embarrassed. “W-would you take me on as another slave—I mean, party member?”

“Are my ears playing tricks on me or did this girl seriously just say the word

‘slave?’” Emma was shocked. And, okay, who hasn’t had a slip of the tongue before? But *slave*?

“I don’t mind if you use me like a slave,” Luna interrupted. “Let me join your party!”

“Oh, sure,” I said, relieved that was all she wanted.

“Thanks!”

“Ew, I’m against it.”

Emma looked put out, but Luna was jumping for joy. In terms of ability and personality there was no reason to turn her down, though it was pretty weird to see the usually calm, collected Luna so excited.

“I’ve been adventuring on my own for such a long time,” she admitted.

“Surely people have invited you to join their parties before?”

“Well, with my fainting condition, I’d just be a burden on other people, so I never...”

I was pretty sure there were people who would be into that, but that was a different can of worms. At any rate, we went to buy ingredients for dinner, which was now also something of a celebration of our new party.

When we got back, Alice and my parents were already home and making preparations for a barbecue. It seemed like they were in the mood to indulge after I’d given them all that money. I knew I couldn’t trust my father with it.

“Oh, Noir, who’s this beauty you brought with you?!”

“Let me introduce you, father. This is Luna.”

“I work as a cleric. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Wow, Noir, your girlfriend is a half-elf and a cleric? Even more things I can brag about.”

“Sorry to disappoint you father, but she’s not my girlfriend.”

“You know, your mother and I didn’t start out as romantic partners, but look at us now.”

My father hugged my mother to illustrate. She ignored him and continued cutting up ingredients. It didn't really do much for his point, and Emma smacking him and calling him a dummy didn't help either.

"But mother," I said. "I think we're in a bit of a pickle."

"You might be right."

Since we had all been shopping, we had quite a lot of food. Storing the extras in my Pocket Dimension was always an option, but it still seemed a shame.

There was a knock at the door.

"Oh, do we have more guests?" my mother asked. She quickly went to answer it.

I assumed it was just neighbors and kept preparing dinner, but I was wrong. At my mother's shocked gasp, I turned.

"Lady Maria...?"

Maria was there with what looked like her whole family, and they were bowing deeply. The others must've been her parents and brother—I mean, they were all so attractive and refined, they had to be from the highest echelon of society. The second my family recognized Duke Albert, we immediately bowed in turn. Although, if I was being honest, the Duke and the others were less bowing and more prostrating themselves on the floor. The Stardia household was soon in a complete uproar.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" said my father. "Please, raise your head! Right, honey?"

"Y-yes, please!" my mother cried. "I haven't had the chance to mop those floors—please, raise your head."

"O-o-oh no, oh no! Brother dearest, whatever do I do? I spilled soy sauce over there earlier..."

Duke Albert pulled his forehead off the floor and smiled. "Indeed, it does smell of soy sauce."

"Our most humble apologies!"

This time, the Stardia family got down on the floor and Maria's family members all got up, their smiles never faltering.

"We should be apologizing for our intrusion. But we had to give our thanks to Noir and Luna."

"Huh?"

My family didn't understand what was going on. It had always felt a little presumptuous to tell them what I was attempting to do. But the duke explained the situation himself—that Maria had been cursed with a deadly skill, and thanks to my and Luna's efforts, she was free.

"Please allow us to thank you again properly later," he said. "We just couldn't bear not saying something immediately."

"Oh no, please," I said. "You're most welcome in our home, as tiny as it is. Ha ha."

After all, they were already here.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" the duke asked.

"Of course not. It turns out we have too much food tonight anyway. Your family's welcome to come in."

"Very well, I think we'll take you up on that invitation."

And that was how the Albert family ended up having dinner with us. The Stardia house was pretty tight with so many people, but everyone had a good time, so what did that matter?

"Hey, look at their eyes," Emma whispered.

"Huh?"

"Don't they look all swollen and red?"

Emma was right, Maria's family's eyes were all thoroughly reddened.

"They were totally crying. This could be it," said my father.

"Yes," my mother agreed. "This could be our chance!"

I glanced over at them. Needless to say, they were hard at work trying to

ingratiate themselves to the duke's household.

That's my family for you.

Extra Chapter: Olivia's Apprentice

WHEN I FIRST FOUND the hidden dungeon, I was embarrassingly excited. Of course, once I used the password to get in, I pretty much immediately got caught in a trap on the second floor.

At first, I was kind of dismissive of the situation. It was just like: “Aw shucks, look at the pickle I got myself into this time!” I mean, I had the unusual abilities to Get Creative, Bestow, and Edit skills. In the past, I had used all of these to great effect in similar situations. I figured this would be no different.

“You’ve...gotta be kidding.”

Much to my horror, my LP was far too low to break the curse on the chains. Unable to do anything or go anywhere, I just had to wait for someone else to show up. I knew it was probably hopeless, but I kept calling out for help. As I grew weary of hoping for some kind stranger to appear, I started reminiscing about the past. I thought back over all my heart-pounding adventures, fun times, and the interesting people I’d met, but over and over again, my mind turned back to one specific person—

“Please take me on as your apprentice, Ms. Olivia!”

I was out strolling through town one day when a young boy sprung out in front of me. I’d had men ask me out on dates, beg for my hand in marriage, or even challenge me to duels before, but this was the first time I’d been asked for an apprenticeship.

“Hell no. Go away.”

The boy must’ve been fifteen, maybe sixteen at most. Kids are pretty brave at that age, but I immediately turned him down. The whole thing sounded like a total pain in the ass.

“Please reconsider.” He got on his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground. His skin was so smooth and clear, and his face was actually pretty cute,

so it was a little sad to see it soiled with dirt.

“Oh, knock it off. I’m no good at teaching anyway. I’m all about following my instincts, that’s it. I don’t get along well with other people.”

“Still! I’ll work myself to the bone for you!”

“No. I refuse. End of discussion,” I brushed the kid off and went on my way.

I’d hoped he’d give up after that, but I severely underestimated him. He showed up again the next day, and the day after that.

“I’m busy living my own life to the fullest,” I said. “I don’t have time to look after someone else.”

“I’ll stay out of your way! I promise! So, please?!”

Every time I rejected him, he came right back. I figured he had to have a reason, so one day I asked him about it.

“I want to become the best adventurer in the world. I promised my best friend I would. She’s passed away, but I want my name to reach all the way to heaven.” His cute face concealed a strong will. You didn’t usually see that in young people these days. Ugh, that made me sound like an old crone, but it was true.

“All right, I get it. I’ll give you a chance. Come at me with all your might. If you can so much as scratch me, I’ll take you on as an apprentice. You can use whatever weapon you want.”

The boy had a nice-looking sword on his hip, but he hesitated before drawing it.

“Um, right here?”

“Yeah, right here. Don’t worry, I know the palace guards. Come on, use any strategy you want.”

There may not have been a lot of foot traffic, but we were in the middle of the street, so I wasn’t surprised that he hesitated. But that was exactly what I wanted. If he wanted to become the best adventurer in the world, he needed the wits and nerve to overcome something like this.

“U-understood. Here I come!”

I liked the look on his face when he set his mind to something.

“Hiyaa!”

I had to give him credit for actually coming at me full force. He focused on cutting my clothing, but unfortunately, he didn’t really know how to use his sword. His handling was awkward, and his stance was indistinguishable from that of a complete novice. He must have developed some odd habits by training himself.

“There!”

“Ahh?!”

I gently kicked his hand and he dropped his sword.

“All right, I’ve seen enough. You failed. I know it’s not really my place to say this, but you should give up on the adventurer thing. You’ll never make it, let alone be best in the world. People only make it to the top of their guild by having an extraordinary ability to begin with. Just like I do.”

I was sure there were plenty of exceptions, but this boy clearly didn’t have what it took.

“I’m gonna work until I get there. Even if it kills me.”

“Um, so lemme be clear here, this isn’t just an issue of skills. I was hoping you’d use the location to your advantage at least. Like throwing a sign at me or claiming I was a thief to get other people to help you.”

“But I...”

“That’s the kind of mindset you need.”

Of course, it’d be a different story if he was extremely talented, but he just wasn’t. I felt a little bad, but I figured that would be enough to put him on a more typical path. I turned my back on the kid, feeling like I’d done a good deed.

Oh, how wrong I was! He showed up again the next day. I was enjoying myself at a bar when he came in, once more begging me to make him my apprentice.

He even brought a present this time, which was a real pain. Particularly because it was my favorite fruit.

“I think you’re the best adventurer in the whole world, Ms. Olivia,” he said without a shred of shame.

“You know, the world is a pretty big place, kid. There are all sorts of incredible people out there.”

“But I believe you’re the best.”

Ugh, I couldn’t take it. His eyes were so earnest. If we had been a little closer in age, I probably would have ended up in a rather dubious relationship. That said, it did feel pretty good to be called the best.

“You’ve got a way with words, kid. All right, I’ll give you a tip. You’re too direct with your sword. I bet you can’t tell a lie either.”

“No, I’m not very good at it, ma’am.”

“Thought so. You keep your eyes focused on where you’re trying to strike the whole time. You have to feint with your eyes too. Try pretending to stare at my chest and then slashing me in the stomach! That’s what a top adventurer would do.”

“Isn’t that just being a perv?!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Anyway, you gotta be able to lie!”

“W-will that really make me stronger?”

I was a little drunk, so I accidentally dropped my guard a bit. Thanks to that, day after day, he kept coming back.

“You again?” I was really starting to get tired of this.

“Teach me about goblins today, Master!”

“I’m not your master, stop calling me that.”

“Okay, please teach me about them, Ms. Olivia.”

“Ugh, fine, I’m bored, so just this once. Goblins are typically easy marks, so even you and your sloppy swordsmanship could probably handle them. You have to watch out for iron goblins though, you know, those gray ones? They’re

hard to kill with a blade, you have to aim right for the eyes. And, of course, feint properly to land your hit.”

The boy scribbled in a notebook. He was so sincere. I had to wonder if I was ever like that. No, definitely not. I was always a bit of a cynic.

Even after a month, his interest never waned.

“Ms. Olivia, what’s the fastest way to get stronger?”

“Eating delicious food, fooling around with members of the opposite sex, and being admired by the masses, probably.”

“Isn’t that just indulging your baser desires?!”

“Yeah, but that’s what makes me strong.”

“You really are unusual, Master. I don’t think I could follow your example, so I’m just going to focus on learning to use my sword.”

I could feel my heart waver as I watched him run off. Maybe I really should take him under my wing.

The next day, ordering a drink at my usual watering hole, the bartender asked: “Olivia, are you doing okay?”

“Doing okay? What do you mean?”

“You know, with that apprentice of yours.”

“He’s not my apprentice.”

“Really? He’s always following you around, so I just assumed. But I heard he...”

I tilted my head in anticipation.

“I heard he died yesterday,” he said.

“What...?”

“Apparently, he fought a monster outside of town and got himself killed.”

I felt something unusual. It was almost like I’d been bashed in the head. The world started to spin, but I snapped myself out of it.

“Where...are his remains?”

When he told me, I ran as fast as I could to the church. The boy was lying on a cot, surrounded by a priest, an adult man, and a girl.

“Did you know him?” the priest asked.

I nodded and looked down at the boy’s body. His throat had claw marks on it. His carotid artery was severed, so he’d probably bled out.

“Are you his father and sister?” I asked, but they shook their heads.

“He has no family to speak of. I’m her father. My daughter snuck past the gate guards to pick flowers.”

“My friends told me it was a safe spot. I’m so sorry...” The girl, who had to be about ten, started to cry over the boy’s body. “He came to save me when those grey monsters attacked...”

The boy often went outside the town walls to practice with his sword. He may have been weak, but he could handle goblins on his own. But this time, he went up against an iron goblin. I’d never heard of them appearing in that area. There wasn’t really anything to say. He must’ve had really rotten luck.

“He bought my daughter time to run back to town. She asked the soldiers for help right away, but it was too late. They found the corpse of an iron goblin next to his body.”

“He killed it?”

“Stabbed right through the eye, I hear. It probably hit back even with the fatal wound.”

I touched the boy’s cold cheek. His beautiful, smooth skin didn’t have a mark on it.

I worked with the priest to dig his grave and lay him to rest. On my way back from the church, I found myself looking up at the sky. I could have sworn I saw his face smiling back at me.

“He remembered what I taught him.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised—he wrote it all down. He shouldn’t have been any match for that goblin, but he managed to land a killing blow.

I couldn't help but wonder whether things would have been different if I'd actually trained him. If I'd become his master and Bestowed some kind of skill on him, he might have had a different future...

I waited for what felt like an eternity, trapped in the hidden dungeon. It was far too long for a mere human to tolerate. I went back through all sorts of memories, but in the end that boy's smile kept coming back to me. I was in an endless pit of guilt. I started to think that maybe the chains were penance; it made me more inclined to accept my fate.

And yet I really wanted someone to talk to. I could have used my Telepathy skill to call out, but I gave up on that. There was a 99 percent chance no one would come.

That was, until one fateful day when Noir entered the hidden dungeon. My heart pounded with anticipation of what kind of person he might be. It had been so long since I'd seen someone else, even if he had a face like an orc, I might have fallen in love with him.

When I finally laid eyes on Noir, it felt like destiny—he looked almost exactly like that boy.

A little while after we met, Noir asked me a strange question. "Master, why are you so nice to me?"

<Huh? Where's this coming from?>

"I mean, you gave me your really valuable skills at the drop of a hat, and now you're teaching me all this stuff, even though I didn't do anything to deserve it."

I must've seemed like nothing more than a meddlesome young lady—and no, that wasn't a mistake, I'm not giving up the title of "young lady" just yet.

I may not have been able to make facial expressions anymore, thanks to the cursed chains, but I could change the sound of my voice, so I made sure to sound especially cheery.

<Because you have such nice, smooth skin Noir. If it weren't for these chains,

I'd gobble you right up.> “Oh no, I’m in danger. I’ll tell you how to get out of those chains in another two hundred years.”

<Like you'll even still be alive then!>

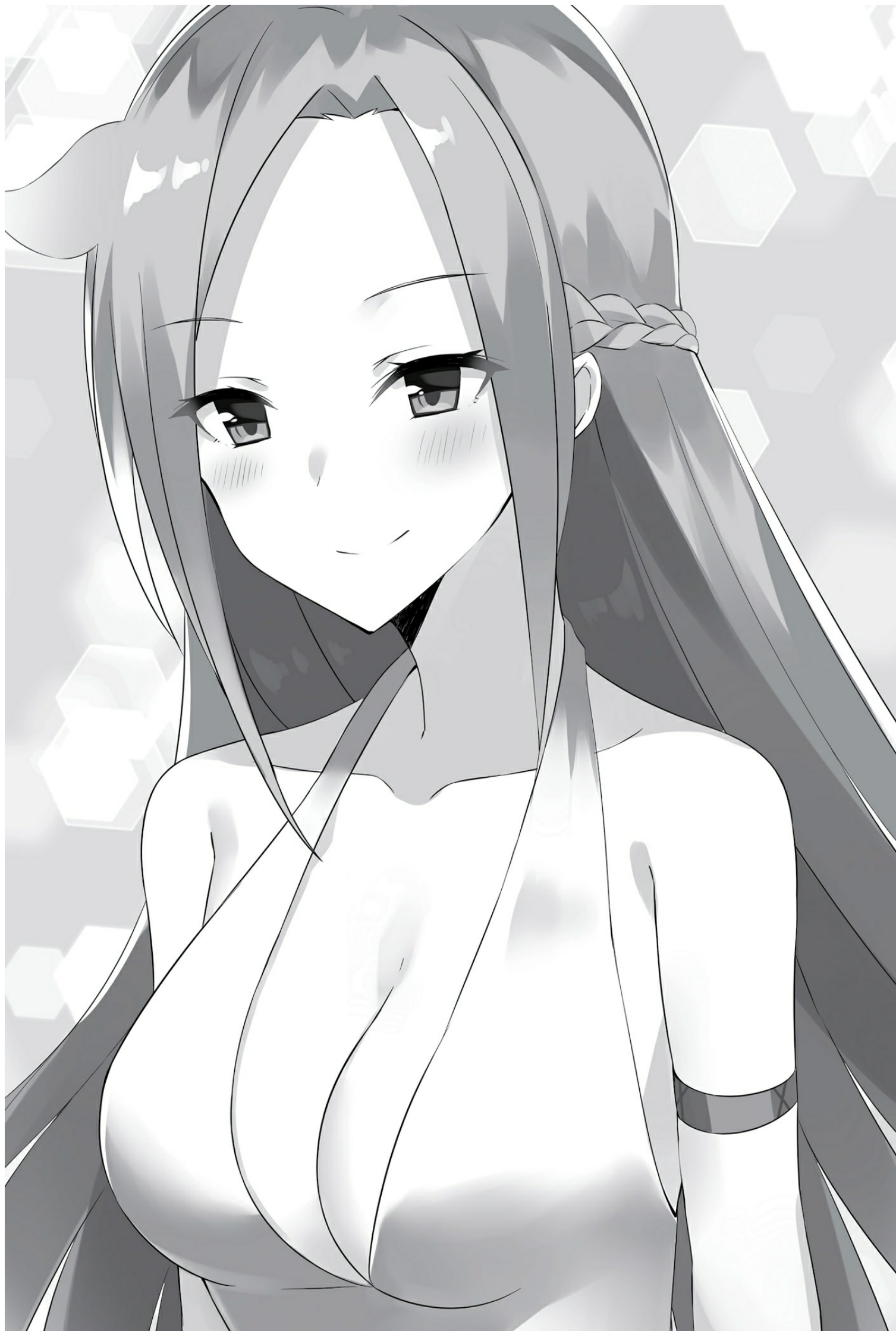
Maybe I was helping him just to make myself feel better. Maybe, even though I couldn't change the past, I could rid myself of those lingering regrets. And I was happy that Noir took everything in.

<Tell me you love your master.>

“I love what a pushover my master is.”

<Not like that!>

I wanted Noir to take his time and grow strong. Although, of course I didn't want him to surpass me. That way, I could be his master forever!



Extra Chapter: A Little Sister's Job

SOME DAYS, I woke up immediately and got out of bed with ease. Other days I woke up tired and it felt like my body was made of lead. But if it was a weekday, I had to drag myself out of bed, regardless of how I felt. Which is why, on days when I had an easy time getting up, I was happy.

"I slept like a log. Back to the grindstone today," I said, climbing out of bed, but the next thing that came out of my mouth was more of a shriek. "Whoa?! Alice, what are you doing here?!"

I was shocked to find my little sister sitting in the corner of my room. I couldn't fathom why.

"Good morning, brother dearest. I see you slept well."

"Um, way to ignore my question."

"I'm not exactly ignoring it so much as I don't really have a reason."

"Well that's kind of terrifying. Could you make one up, please?"

"At about four o'clock this morning, my heart started beating out of my chest. I thought I was having some kind of attack, so I came into your room to gaze upon your sleeping face."

"And did that fix it?"

"Promptly!"

She just looked so happy, I couldn't really lay into her for it. My sleeping face didn't cost me a thing, so I didn't really mind her looking at it, but it wasn't exactly something worth losing sleep over. Anyway, the two of us headed downstairs for breakfast. My father was tearing bread into small pieces, tossing them into the air and catching them in his mouth.

"Did you see that? I'm a dragon eating people falling from the sky!"

It was something of a family tradition not to react to his terrible jokes. Well, I guess we probably would have applauded if it was actually funny, but this was

just depressingly lame. Sometimes he'd give up after his first attempt, other times he'd keep trying. This was, unfortunately, one of the latter times.

"Think you can do it, Noir?" he said, tossing three pieces of bread up in the air and catching them in his mouth, one after the other.

I wished he'd stop looking so smug over something so stupid.

"Fine," I said. "I'll play your stupid game."

I copied him and caught three pieces of bread in my mouth. I almost missed the last one, but I got it in the end. Alice applauded.

"That's my big brother. Only you could pull that off."

"Huh? Alice? But your daddy just did it!"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't watching."

"You ignore me?! Your own father?!"

"Perhaps that's why you don't attract much attention, dear," my mother said with a tender smile.

My father was devastated. By the time I left for school he was talking about giving up his title of father.

"Let's walk together part of the way," Alice said.

"Sure."

We ran into a number of familiar faces on the way to school. Alice greeted them very politely. It made me feel proud to call myself her brother.

"What do you plan to do after you finish class today, brother?"

"I'm going to see the cleric, Luna. I have something I need to do with her today."

"Bring me along then."

"Uh, that's going to be a little..."

"I'm coming."

Alice's smile was kind of terrifying. All I could do was nod in the face of that silent pressure.

First period was with Ms. Elena, but it was an actual sit-down class, not practice. And on morals, no less. Specifically, it was about how awful it was to fight with your blood relatives. There was a long history of brothers killing each other in their quest for the throne, or sisters fighting over men, and tales of brothers and sisters fighting to a draw. The concept was pretty alien to me—wasn't family all about helping each other? That's what my parents always taught me.

"Just because people are related by blood, doesn't mean they'll get along. It's not unusual for members of the same family to have incompatible personalities. I've even seen a family duel before."

Ms. Elena's mercenary work had taken her all over the world, and apparently people viewed family pretty differently depending on where you were. To some people, it was nothing more than a transactional relationship.

"So, Noir, do you like your family?" asked Ms. Elena.

"Of course I do. I'm the person I am today because my parents worked so hard. I'm living proof that you can be happy even if you're poor."

"Heh, don't call yourself poor. But it does sound like you have a nice family, make sure you treat them right."

"I will, ma'am."

Admittedly, the Stardia family didn't *always* get along. Whenever high-quality meat ended up on the dinner table, we turned into ravenous animals competing for a precious resource. My father was a particularly bad offender, while Alice was the complete opposite—she'd give me some of her portion to make sure I was well fed. Perhaps she deserved my admiration the most.

After school, Alice was waiting for me outside the gates of the Hero Academy, and the two of us headed to the temple where Luna worked. There were non-clerics treating patients there as well, but as usual, Luna's line was especially popular. We waited until she was done.

"She must be very talented."

"I think it's more than just that," I said, looking at the line of young men waiting to see her.

"Ahh, she looks so pretty today," said one.

"She's a beauty whether you see her from afar or close up," another agreed. "I fell down some stairs on purpose just so I could come here."

"I sliced off my own finger," said a third.

I wanted to tell them they were just causing more trouble than anything, but they wouldn't have listened. Once Luna had gotten through her line, she ran over to us.

"Sorry to make you wait like that, Sir Noir...oh, and Lady Alice."

"Hello, I tagged along. I hope I won't be in the way."

"Well...yeah, you might be a little."

But Alice wasn't backing down.

"If you're looking to get some alone time with my brother," she said, "you'll do it over my dead body."

"Very scary," said Luna. "But let me be honest with you, I wanted to borrow your brother so he could pretend to be my boyfriend, so you being around would make things a little complicated."

Allow me to explain Luna's rather delicate situation: one of her patients was an older woman who had taken quite a liking to Luna, and was getting quite persistent about asking her to marry her son. Luna eventually got frustrated and told her that she already had her heart set on someone else, but the old woman only asked to meet this person.

"I think she'll give up on the idea if she sees I have a boyfriend. I know I didn't ask you beforehand, but I can't exactly take it back now."

"If you think I'm good enough, I'd be happy to help you out."

"Thank you, Sir Noir! But, um, what will we do about Lady Alice...?"

"Oh, don't you worry," Alice said. "I'll just explain that I'm his little sister."

Luna seemed relieved. I had a bad feeling about the situation, but wrote it off

as unfounded paranoia.

The three of us headed immediately to the old woman's house. When we came to the door, a woman of about fifty hurried out to greet us.

"I've been expecting you, Miss Cleric! Come on in."

"I'm a little busy," Luna said. "So I'd prefer we just handle things here. This is the boyfriend I mentioned before."

"My name is Noir Stardia, and I have the honor of dating Luna."

I actually got it out without stumbling—pretty good for me. The old woman looked me over.

"Goodness, what a sweet boy. You look like a solid couple too, so much for my hopes of you marrying into my family."

I was surprised at how easily she accepted it. She probably wouldn't bother Luna anymore. We indulged her a little longer, and then went to leave.

"Miss Cleric, Noir, I wish you well."

"Thank you."

"Yes, things are going well between Luna and I."

"So they claim..."

"Huh?"

Alice had been unusually quiet the whole time, and her sudden comment caught me off guard. The old woman responded as you might expect.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm talking about my brother and Ms. Luna. This whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing is an act."

"Wh-what are you talking about?" Luna said. "N-Noir and I are really together!"

"Y-yeah, Alice. That's not very funny."

"Okay, then prove it."

Luna and I were a bit shaken. Did she expect us to start flirting on the spot? I

couldn't understand what Alice was thinking. The old woman's shoulders drooped when she saw us looking bewildered.

"I see...so that's how it is. You don't really have a boyfriend, do you, Miss Cleric? You just don't want to marry my son..."

"No, that's not it," Alice declared. I couldn't figure out why she had changed her tone again. Was she trying to protect Luna? "Ms. Luna does have a lover."

"Who?"

"It's me," she said. "I am Ms. Luna's true love."

It was such a hard right turn, Luna and I just stood there, our mouths agape. Before we could regain our wits, Alice continued.

"A cleric loving a member of the same sex is seen by many as indecent, hence the act. I owe you an apology. But please, keep this a secret."

"O-oh of...of course. I won't say a word..."

The old woman looked extremely put off, but Alice thanked her again and left. Luna and I were still at a complete loss, but Alice had boxed us in pretty well.

"Alice, what was that?" I asked.

"Sorry. Let me explain."

Alice argued that, if the lie about Luna and I dating ever got out, Luna and I would be in a bad position. "I mean, what if that woman told other people that you two were together? Ms. Luna has a reputation to maintain and rumors spread even to the heavens."

I wasn't really convinced a silly rumor could get that far but, by her own logic, surely her strategy was even worse. I mean, a rumor about a revered cleric being a lesbian would be a lot juicier, surely?

"I think I convinced her to keep quiet, but you're right, it might not work. But if that does happen, only Ms. Luna and I will be affected, so that avoids a worst-case scenario."

"So basically, Lady Alice," said Luna. "You were concerned about keeping your brother out of trouble?"

“That’s a little sister’s job after all!”

Alice smiled warmly, and Luna clapped her hands in admiration.

“Sibling love is such a beautiful thing. Your parents really raised you two well.”

“I would protect my brother even if it meant my body burned to a pile of ash. This is one of the principles of the Stardia family.”

That’s the first I’ve heard of it! I was positive she’d just made that up, but I couldn’t exactly complain. And Luna probably wouldn’t get that much flack, even if the rumors circulated that she was gay.

“Honestly,” said Luna. “It would be great if this made guys less likely to hit on me. Maybe I should be proactive about it and just tell people I’m into women.”

Things may have not gone exactly as planned, but it turned out all right in the end. We bid Luna goodbye and headed home.

I gave Alice a warning as we walked back to the house together. “I don’t really like the idea of you sacrificing yourself to protect me.”

“But brother dearest, I could throw those words right back at you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since we were little, you’ve always put me first, no matter the cost to yourself, haven’t you? I’m just returning the favor,” she said calmly, and kept on walking.



Extra Chapter: I'll See You Tomorrow

ONE WEEKEND, I had just finished eating lunch and was taking a walk around town to get some exercise. After about thirty minutes of aimless wandering, I heard a strange thumping sound coming from behind me. If I'd been in the dungeon, I would have panicked but, thankfully, I was in the middle of town. I turned around calmly to see a cute girl sprinting at full speed.

"There you are! I was looking for you, Noir!" It was Emma, looking adorable as ever. For some reason, I had the feeling that she was always looking for me.

"I see you're as, uh, seismically active as ever, Emma."

"Don't say that while looking at my chest!"

They really did bounce every which way when she ran. It was kind of hard to ignore.

"Well, that aside, did you need me for something?" I asked.

"Am I not allowed to see you unless I need something?"

"Of course you're allowed. It makes me happy when you just wanna see me."

"R-really? Just how happy?" She looked at me with those gleaming eyes.

I had no words, so I just responded with a hug. I squeezed her extra tight and got some LP out of it. Making hugs into a sort of greeting was really handy for that.

"So, where are we going?" she asked.

"Okay, I *do* have somewhere I wanna go," I said. "Luness Park. What do you say?"

"I haven't been there in ages. Sounds good to me."

Luness Park was on the northern edge of the residential quarter. Emma and I used to play there when we were young. I watched her ponytail sway as we walked to the park. It was a weekend afternoon, so it was full of people—from young men and women, to old married couples, and little kids playing in the

sandbox.

“Emma, it looks like all the benches are full.”

“That’s fine, we can just walk around,” Emma said, grabbing my hand and leading me along.

The park was full of lush and verdant trees. Emma stopped in front of one of them and smiled at me. “Do you remember when you fell from this branch? You said you could fly.”

“Don’t remind me!”

“Ah ha ha ha, no! If you wanna stop me, you’ll have to catch me!” She swung her arms out girlishly and started running away.

At first, I just shook my head, but Emma provoked me by making a really weird face. I dashed after her.

“Waaaait!”

“Eeeek! He’s gonna do something weird to me if he catches me!”

I really wish you wouldn’t say that. One wrong move and people are going to think I’m some kind of degenerate!

I was actually starting to get into it, but for some reason Emma suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“Whoa, that was close. Emma, you almost made me crash right into you.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, but...look.”

Emma was looking at the sandbox. There were several kids playing in it—all around seven or eight years old. From the tone of their voices, it sounded like they were fighting about something.

“Just leave already. This is *our* sandbox.”

“No. Me and Lilly were here first!”

From what I could gather, the boy and girl were playing in the sandbox when a group of boys showed up and demanded that they leave. Bullies were usually bullies from a young age, after all. The larger boy, who was probably their leader, pushed the other boy over. The girl named Lilly came running over.

“Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine, Lilly. Stand back.”

“Ew, you two are so gross. Why are you letting a *girl* protect you?! What are you gonna do about *this*?!”

“What?!”

The bully kicked over the sandcastle the pair had built together, leaving nothing but a featureless pile of sand. Lilly’s friend tried to stop him, but he didn’t stand a chance against the bigger kids. He still didn’t give up until Lilly stopped him.

“It’s fine. We can always make another sandcastle. Let’s go play over there instead.”

“I’m not gonna forget this,” the boy growled.

As they left, the bullies opened their mouths and laughed. “You’re such a loser! That’s why your only friend is a *giiirl*!”

Sticking my nose into a fight between children may not have been the best idea, but before I even knew what I was doing, I’d clapped the boys on the shoulder. “You know, the only losers here are you guys.”

“Huh? Who are you?”

“I’m Noir, third son of the Stardia family.”

“Who cares?” He was the one who asked, but it wasn’t like names were important.

“Girls are people too,” I said. “What’s the big deal about playing with them?”

“Huh? Ugh, you’re so lame. What a loser. Go play house or something.”

“What’s wrong with playing house? You’ll have families in the future, so you might as well get some practice in. Plus, your moms are all girls. The only people who don’t understand that are loser babies. Oh wait, you are still babies.”

I couldn’t stop myself. The boy tried to kick me in the shin, but I deftly dodged him.

“Oh, you wanna dance, little boy?” I asked.

“Don’t underestimate us just because you’re a little bigger than we are. We’ve got numbers on our side.”

“Cool. I guess I can roast you as a group then.”

I turned my palm up toward the sky and produced a Holy Flame. I could feel the heat tickle my skin. The kids could clearly feel it too. Their eyes went wide as I pointed right at them.

“The thing about attacking someone is: it significantly increases the chances that *you’ll* be attacked too. So, who wants to try kicking me in the shin again?”

“R-r-run away!”

Once they realized they couldn’t beat me, they turned tail and ran. A clever decision on their part. If they’d been up against a monster, they wouldn’t even have had that opportunity.

“I guess that was kinda childish, huh?” I asked Emma, dropping the spell.

She flashed a toothy smile. “Well, we’re still basically kids ourselves, so I don’t see the problem in being a little childish!”

I guess she had a point. We were only sixteen. We didn’t really have the life experience to act like proper adults yet.

She nodded at her own explanation. “Since we’re here, why don’t we play a little?”

“Huh? I think playing in a sandbox might be a little *too* childish, even for us.”

“Oh, come on! Hurry up and join me!”

I wasn’t going to convince her otherwise, so I joined Emma in the sandbox. At some point, we settled on making a reproduction of my house and started construction of the first floor.

“Hey,” she said. “Did those two kids who were playing in here first, like... remind you of anybody?”

“Remind me of anybody? Like who?”

“Like us when we were little, silly.”

Now that she mentioned it, similar things had happened to us a bunch of

times when we were younger. I spent the most time playing with Emma, and other boys would pick fights with me over it. They'd harass Emma too. You know how kids are: they have a tendency to pick on people they like. Emma was always cute, so she got her fair share of misdirected attention.

"You'd always protect me like that too," she said. "No matter how weak you were."

"And boy was I weak..." I groaned when I flashed back to getting kicked in the nuts. Again and again, over and over...

Emma wrapped her hands around mine. "But that made me really happy. There are probably plenty of strong people in the world who protect others, but you're the only person I know who keeps fighting even when you know you're going to lose."

The look on Emma's face was so cute that I couldn't look her in the eye. I fiddled with the sand, trying to figure out how I should react. Then Emma suddenly smashed her hand into the sand Stardia house, destroying it.

"What?! I was still building that!"

"Ah ha ha ha, I thought of something even better. Let's play house!"

I wanted to run, but Emma got me in a hold. Any hope I had of escaping was dashed.

The sun was already setting by the time we got back to my house. I won't admit just how engrossed we'd been in playing house, despite how old we were.

"You really got into it after a while, Noir."

"....."

"I think you had a lot of fun playing an old drunk," she said. "Demanding that I bring you more booze."

"I thought you promised not to talk about that."

"He he he, now I have more dirt on you."

“You really have me wrapped around your finger,” I told her.

We exchanged glances and then burst into laughter, just like always. That was when I noticed that Emma’s hair clip had some sand caught on it and reached over to brush it off.

“You always wear this, don’t you? I mean, I’m glad you like my present of course.” It had a pretty stone that matched her eyes. I’d given it to her for her birthday.

“I treasure it as much as our memories together. Thank you, Noir.”

“I’ll get you something even nicer for your next birthday.”

“Yay! I hope you’re looking forward to your birthday too!”

“I will.”

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow!”

Emma ran off. Apparently, she was going out to dinner with her family that evening. She kept turning around to wave to me as I watched her go, and I responded in kind.

I felt like I’d gone back in time, to when I was a little kid without a care in the world. I just stood there for a while, even after she was long out of sight. I couldn’t wait for tomorrow.

“See you tomorrow,” I mumbled to myself, finally going inside.



Afterword

A BIG HELLO FROM ME, Meguru Seto, to all my new readers and those of you who've been with me this whole time. Thank you for taking the time to read *The Hidden Dungeon Only I Can Enter*!

This novel was originally published online on *Let's Be Novelists*. I know what some of you are thinking: "What's the point when I could just read it online?" Well, you'll be happy to hear that I've made all sorts of improvements for the print edition—from correcting typos and other errors, to adding tens of pages of additional content. So, I hope you'll support this version as well. If nothing else, it would make me very happy.

Now allow me to take a moment to express my appreciation for Takehana Note, the wonderful artist who illustrated the characters for this series. I can't express how grateful I am for the beautiful illustrations that really bring my characters to life, and which have given me plenty of inspiration beyond the boundaries of my own imagination. Thanks also to my editor, Shou Ji, for giving me such useful advice and taking such good care of me, as well as to the designers and proofreaders who helped pull this book together.

But most of all, I must thank all of you who went out and bought this book. Thank you so very much. I look forward to meeting you again in volume two.



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